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Residents in control

Community grants in Big Local areas
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www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk

Acknowledgements

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About this research

Through the Big Local programme, many areas use their funding to deliver grants in their community, to build or improve local capacity and community infrastructure. This research explores the benefits that community grants bring to Big Local areas and the conditions for successful community grant making more widely. While it has primarily been written for Local Trust, it may also provide learning for other funders and local voluntary and community groups who run or support community grant programmes.

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Introduction

In October 2021, IVAR (the Institute for Voluntary Action Research) was commissioned by Local Trust to undertake research on community grants. The research explored conditions for successful community grant making and the benefits community grants bring to Big Local areas.

Big Local is a 15-year, Big Lottery-funded initiative to support 150 communities in England. The programme is run by Local Trust, an independent charitable trust. Each Big Local area has been awarded £1.15m to spend over 10 to 15 years. The work in areas is led by local volunteers who form 'Big Local partnerships' to set their own priorities.

Many Big Local areas choose to use their funding to deliver grants in the community, seeing them as a way to build or improve local capacity and community infrastructure. Community grants are very small grants made at the community or grassroots level,¹ which range from £50 to £5,000. In the Big Local model, residents – who typically are not professional grant makers – make decisions about how local needs can be met,² and they may choose to do this through community grant giving. Community grants are awarded to groups and individuals operating at the hyperlocal or grassroots level. Often, those receiving community grants may be ineligible or find it challenging to secure grants from larger funders (Local Trust, 2020).

We ran action research in four Big Local partnerships (Hateley Cross, Kingsbrook and Cauldwell, Rastrick and Roseworth) that wanted to develop their community

grants programme and were at a point of development or transition. Working in partnership with each area, we arrived at a specific focus for their action research. This report draws out overarching learning, looking across the four Big Local areas to explore:

1. the context, conditions and considerations for successful community grants schemes
2. how community grants help to develop local engagement with the Big Local programme, build local capacity and enhance the local voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (VCSE)
3. the role of community grants in helping to develop and enhance community control.

While this report has primarily been written for Local Trust, it may also provide learning for other funders and local voluntary and community groups who run or support community grant programmes.

Learning from this project has also been used to produce a guide with practical insights on designing and delivering community grant programmes in Big Local areas.

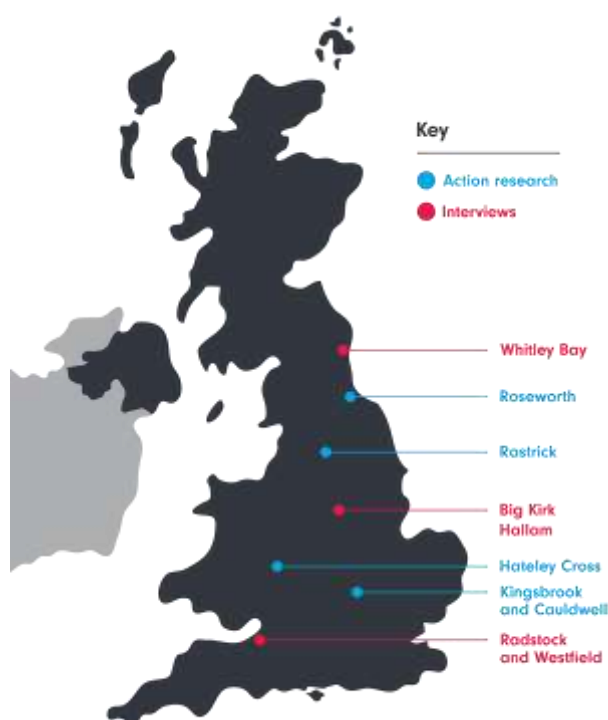
¹ Sometimes referred to in Big Local areas as a 'community chest' or a 'community kitty'.

² Seen in this context as individuals with a professional background in designing and administering grants, for example, for an independent funder or local authority.

1.1 Research approach

This study used an action research approach to support four Big Local partnerships in developing their community grants programme (see Appendix 1 for detail on this approach).³ Activity included:

- **three scoping interviews and a workshop with Local Trust staff** to support the development of a community grants framework (see Appendix 2)
- **recruiting four Big Local partnerships** in which to deliver action research
- **running 12 action research sessions**, three in each of the four Big Local partnerships, from November 2021 to March 2022, as well as follow-up support between sessions
- **three interviews with other Big Local areas** using community grants to gather additional insights
- **a 'Share & Build' workshop** with participants from the four Big Local partnerships, where we shared emerging findings and co-designed a guide with practical insights on designing and delivering community grant programmes in Big Local areas.



³ IVAR's action research approach starts with a practical problem, challenge or opportunity, working with our research partners and participants to pin down what needs to be addressed. We work with those with direct experience of an issue, supporting them to resolve challenges, open up opportunities and draw out useful solutions. Our aim is to generate practical learning, through questions, reflection and debate, to help produce outcomes that are meaningful and long-lasting.

Context, conditions and considerations for successful community grant making

This section of the report explores learning on the context, conditions and considerations for successful community grants programmes, based on our work with the four Big Local partnerships.

Across the four Big Local areas, successful community grants programmes were described as those that:

- fund things that respond to community need
- balance support for existing projects with funding new ideas
- stimulate excitement about both Big Local and community activity/organising.

The form and structure of community grants varied according to each partnership's specific context and priorities. However, we can identify five overarching characteristics that were key to the success of community grants programmes:

1. A clear purpose and shared vision
2. An understanding of local needs and issues
3. Accessible and inclusive grant making processes
4. Appropriate monitoring, reporting and learning processes

5. Willingness to try new things and take risks

2.1 A clear purpose and shared vision

All four Big Local partnerships wanted to align their community grants programmes with the wider partnership vision and priorities. Two of the partnerships in this study wanted to use their community grants programmes to further work on a specific aspect of their strategic priorities. For example, Roseworth Big Local (2021) has been seeking to "proactively target our most vulnerable", in particular older people. For the Roseworth partnership, COVID-19 emphasised the importance of tackling loneliness and isolation and providing opportunities for people to come together. During the action research, Roseworth began to use community grants as a way to encourage community activity focused on supporting older people and those with long-term health conditions.

Aligning community grants programmes with the partnership's wider strategic priorities helped provide a clear framework for focusing and organising community grants. This was beneficial because it provided partnership members, all of whom are volunteers with busy lives, with a lens to focus their thinking about who, what and how they fund, and supported a deeper understanding of where community grants were best placed to add value to the Big Local partnership's ambition.

Each partnership talked about the importance of periodically refreshing their vision and priorities to ensure all activities, including community grants, continue to reflect community need. In this way, alignment to the partnerships' strategic objectives remained a flexible tool, helping to mitigate the potential risk of inhibiting responses to new or emerging needs.

Some areas also took specific steps to counter this risk. Kingsbrook and Cauldwell Big Local created an 'innovations pot' of grant funding for projects that are outside the partnership's priorities but where there is identifiable community benefit. For example, one idea which has been suggested is supporting The Moth, a space which celebrates the art and craft of personal storytelling.

A clear, well understood vision helps support a strong narrative about what community grants are and what they can be used for, that can be communicated with external stakeholders (such as partner organisations, the partnership's locally trusted organisation (LTO) and the local community). Explicitly connecting community grants to the Big Local partnership plan also helps residents involved in grant making to feel accountable to their neighbours and local community in terms of spending the money well.

2.2 An understanding of local needs and issues

Previous Local Trust research has found that community grants provide a means for Big Local partnerships to engage with their community (Local Trust, 2020). Our action research with the four partnerships found examples of this.

Understanding local needs and issues was essential to stimulate grant applications and make effective decisions about what to fund. Regularly refreshing this local knowledge and understanding of community activity in the area – as well as challenging assumptions – was also important: communities are not static, and partnerships' understanding of the needs, interests, demographics and spaces within the local community need to be refreshed.

The areas participating in this research had seen grant applications decrease since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. When we began work on this project together, most areas were just restarting or relaunching their community grant programmes and were keen to draw in applicants. Attracting new groups to apply for community grants requires an understanding of local services and activities and where the gaps are.

Hateley Cross Big Local recognised that shifts in the local landscape since COVID-19 meant they needed to refresh their understanding and undertook a mapping exercise to do so. This identified a local community hub where groups and organisations were meeting, many of which could benefit from community grants.

Building relationships with well-networked groups and organisations is another way that the Big Local partnerships were able to explore and respond to local need:

“Sometimes we don’t know there is a demand for an activity in our community, and we need to build relationships with key leaders so we can get that insight.” (Big Local partnership member)

Reviewing community grant programmes also provided an impetus to review the partnership’s approach to community outreach and targeting. The areas involved in this research were keen to receive applications from groups and individuals that had not applied before because this provides an opportunity to fund an activity that does not already exist in the community and build local skills, knowledge and capacity:

“It’s a good thing when we get applications that are obviously from people who have not applied for funding before: ‘you haven’t done this before’ and that’s what we want.” (Big Local partnership member)

Achieving this required a mix of community engagement, strong messaging, awareness raising and communicating via different channels. In each of the four areas, a website or Facebook page was typically the first place residents learned of community grants. Web pages included information about the purpose of community grants, what has been funded before, and the application and decision-making process.

Rastrick Big Local redesigned their website to make it more user friendly and interactive, reducing text and losing any jargon. They also included images and quotes from groups, organisations or individuals who had previously received funding to help inspire potential applicants. Partnerships combined the use of digital platforms with posters and flyers in community hubs and shared spaces.

Making good use of local networks to publicise funds and spot possible collaborations is an important part of delivering community grants.

2.3 Accessible and transparent grant making

The Big Local partnerships in this research were keen to identify ways to improve access to their community grants programmes and ensure they adopted fair and transparent grant making processes.

The four areas provided a significant amount of support to applicants and funded groups. This was integral to making community grants accessible to people working at a grassroots level. It includes outreach work that encourages applications; assistance with writing applications; guidance about how to run a project or set up a group or organisation for community benefit; and signposting to further funding and support.

Most areas used the action research to develop a targeted approach to community engagement, seeking to get beyond residents and local groups who are more familiar with navigating funding processes and encourage new applicants. This required working in ways that felt more responsive, accessible and inclusive to the groups or communities the areas sought to support. Approaches included:

- **speaking directly with older people:** Roseworth Big Local acknowledged older people may not access information online. They decided to attend local groups like bingo, lunch clubs and a knitting group, where older people meet, to help explain what community grants can be used for and encourage people to apply.

- **working with schools to encourage applications from young people:** Hateley Cross and Big Kirk Hallam built relationships with teachers who were interested in using the grant application process to build young people's confidence, writing and presentation skills.
- **encouraging potential applicants to have a conversation with partnership members prior to submitting a formal application:** in Rastrick Big Local, the Big Local worker coordinates these conversations and the partnership provides feedback on unsuccessful applications,⁴ encouraging applicants to reapply for future grant rounds. "It is not a no forever – but how can we get to a point of being a yes" (Big Local worker).

Partnerships hoped to stimulate applications for the community grant schemes but also to raise awareness about their other activities and reach new groups and communities that might otherwise have been or felt excluded.

Application forms

If a funding programme is intended to be open to a wide range of people, accessibility should be considered early in the design of funding criteria, the application process and outreach activities. We found that community grants programmes often mirrored issues being tackled by the wider funding sector, in particular, how to avoid long and overcomplicated application processes whilst still carrying out due diligence. The requirement for lots of information creates barriers, especially for first time applicants, and goes against recent shifts towards more streamlined, lighter touch processes. This can be frustrating for applicants who may feel there are too many hoops to jump through for very small amounts of money.

"Some small groups have a difficult time understanding what is meant by [a] constitution or why having a bank account is important. They are the ones we are trying to encourage and get established." (Big Local partnership member)

We worked with areas to put themselves in the shoes of applicants, thinking particularly about those new to funding, new to the partnership and from communities excluded in other ways. Together we identified ways to streamline application processes, alongside more tightly aligning them with the partnership strategy:

- **Reduce the number of questions:** areas redesigned application forms to ask fewer, more succinct questions. They considered what is essential, to ensure the partnership is carrying out its due diligence, and what is 'nice to have'.
- **Use accessible language:** areas rewrote questions in clear and concise language and removed jargon and acronyms.
- **Accept a range of formats:** some partnerships discussed video applications or holding events for residents to pitch their ideas.
- **Appropriate due diligence requirements for the size of the grant:** areas reflected on whether they could remove some expectations that felt out of sync with the scale of funding and the type of applicants they were trying to attract, for example, requiring applicants to have a terms of reference or constitution in place. It was also essential to agree clear parameters with the wider partnership and the LTO about minimum requirements for due diligence.

⁴ Many Big Local partnerships fund workers to support the delivery of Big Local. The role usually involves project management or leading on community engagement.

- **Supporting skills and knowledge:** by continuing to provide pre-application support and signposting to other funding opportunities after the Big Local grant.
- **User testing:** inviting some groups to test out the application process once it is designed, to get their feedback.

Decision making

The Big Local programme aims to increase community control, defined by Local Trust as the range of ways that communities can bring to life the changes they want to see locally and giving them the power to make decisions about the things that affect them. It is hoped that community grants can contribute to and help enhance this by involving residents with different backgrounds and levels of experience in decision making.

Involvement in community grants programmes provides residents with an opportunity to draw on their knowledge and lived experience of the local area, to make decisions about how resources are used to bring about positive and lasting change for their communities. However, one of the recurring challenges we heard from areas was about the power imbalance created when one party holds and is responsible for distributing funding, as well as when residents are making grants to other residents.

Areas explored different ways to help mitigate this power imbalance in their decision-making processes:

Within the partnership:

- **Developing the grants/application management skills and confidence of partnership members** by providing peer learning opportunities. This might be facilitated by a Big Local worker.
- **Agreeing how to respond to conflicts of interest** that can arise when community members are both applying for and assessing community grants. Some areas asked applicant members to step out of decision-making meetings, others deferred contentious decisions to the LTO/an independent partner.
- **Creating a community grants sub-group/panel** and inviting different people from the community that may not already be part of the partnership into the decision-making process.

Within the application process:

- **Setting clear expectations** for potential applicants about what the grants can be used for. For example, applications have to align with the partnership's strategy and values, which are decided through consultation with the local community.
- **Having a realistic and transparent timescale** in place for reviewing applications and communicating

Democratising community grants in Radstock and Westfield

In Radstock and Westfield Big Local, individuals and small groups with new ideas are invited to pitch for funding at an annual 'Dragon's Den' event open to the community. Attracting up to 200 people, 20 applicants present their ideas for a chance to win one of ten £500 grants. Applicants must link their ideas to one of the area's priorities and must demonstrate community benefit. Voting rules apply, with all attendees required to place five votes, preventing large groups from swinging the votes.

It is an opportunity for local groups to showcase their ideas and get support, even if they don't win. It's about "letting people know you're out there" and being "able to talk to them about other pots of money available" (Big Local partnership member). For this Big Local, it helps the partnership engage more local people with their main priorities. (For more information see *Dragon's Den 8 July 2022, Radstock and Westfield Big Local, 2022.*)

decisions and ensuring applicants are also made aware of the process and timeline.

- **Providing support to new applicants** to develop ideas but being clear and transparent when pivoting from working alongside potential applicants to an assessor role.
- **Providing feedback on unsuccessful applications** and publishing details of what has been funded.

2.4 Appropriate monitoring, reporting and learning processes

Appropriate monitoring processes, along with opportunities to review and reflect on the data gathered, help partnerships to learn about the difference their grants are making in their community and how they are doing as a grant maker.

Partnerships found that it was sometimes challenging to get applicants to report on progress and how grants had been spent. However, some useful approaches to data collection in the areas include:

- being clear from the outset that funded partners will be required to provide updates on project completion
- allowing funded partners to choose *how* to provide feedback (for example, photos, video or written feedback from service users) and agreeing to this early on
- having different touch points to ask for feedback, for example in the grant confirmation email, when the monitoring pack is shared, and when the project ends
- Big Local partnership members visiting the group/activity to view the work first hand and gather feedback, although

capacity was highlighted as a challenge.

Partnerships' experiences reflect a similar shift by the wider funding sector towards reporting that is proportionate to the size of the grant and meaningful and useful for grantees and for funders (IVAR, 2021):

"We don't want groups to simply [provide] evidence, but also share stories and use this as promotional material that would encourage other groups to apply for community grants." (Big Local partnership member)

This includes only asking for information that will be used and letting funded partners know how it will be used. A brief discussion to design and agree reporting with the funded partner – format, frequency and content – can help ensure reporting is useful.

2.5 Willingness to try new things and take risks

Successful community grant making requires a willingness and capacity to try new things and take some risks. Rastrick Big Local see community grants as a way to support new local ideas, ideally with groups they have not funded before. They recognise that encouraging new ideas means that the partnership has to be comfortable supporting people and activities that are not 'tried and tested'. To do this, their partnership acknowledges and accepts the risk that not all funded activities will succeed or have the same level of impact. Kingsbrook and Cauldwell identified one of their aims as taking a risk on new or innovative ideas: "we should be able to take a punt, life is full of punts!" (Big Local partnership member).

In Rastrick, the partnership believes that the *process* of applying for funding is as important as the outcome of what is funded, because of the beneficial impact on applicants' confidence and skills. In this way, community grants were used to enable local residents to try things out and experiment. All four areas hoped that this would create a ripple effect, building confidence and skills for residents to take part in other types/areas of community action.

Providing new opportunities and activities for their communities was a primary motivation for many residents involved in grant making. Community grants also give residents agency and control over how small pots of money are spent, providing a means to have direct control over local resources.

In addition to increasing community control, community grants have wider benefits – to individuals, groups and the VCSE sector – which we explore in the next section.

2.6 Summary

Community grant making looks different in each Big Local area – it varies in terms of the exact process, focus and approach, according to the context and needs of each area.

However, we found that there were some common considerations – similar to those being taken up in broader funding discussions – that support resident-led community grants programmes. The five things that require ongoing focus were:

1. A clear purpose and vision
2. Investing in understanding need
3. Processes that are accessible, inclusive and appropriate
4. A learning mindset
5. Willingness to take risks

Throughout this section, we have also seen that community grants play a role in enhancing community control.

Across the four partnerships, community grants are helping to enhance community control by providing a means and impetus to engage with the community and reach out to new groups. By reaching out, they are able to connect and familiarise themselves with the work of local groups, extending their network and ability to spot further needs and develop their understanding of what works and what local people want.

Wider benefits of community grant making

Beyond the impact that a community grant has on a particular group or individual, Local Trust hopes that community grants programmes also have the potential to contribute to broader community outcomes. In this section, we look at what we learnt from the four Big Local partnerships about the contribution of community grants to: engage the wider community; build local capacity; and enhance the local voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (VCSE).

As described in section two, community grants, within the framework of a Big Local partnership, also provide a vehicle through which community control can be enhanced. Community grants provide a means to reach out to new groups and give residents agency and control over how small pots of money are spent.

In this section, we look at how community grants can encourage collective action and local empowerment by capacity building and supporting new ideas and initiatives. We also consider how community grants can help attract new individuals to Big Local partnerships and strengthen connections between partnership members and the community.

3.1 Engaging the wider community

During the early years of Big Local, community grants were used to promote the programme and increase the profile of new partnerships (NCVO, IVR and OPM,

2014). They continue to play an important role in raising awareness about Big Local and the activities it supports:

“You can talk about consulting in the community, but unless they can get their hands on some of the £1 million ... There has to be a way local people can come directly and access that funding. Community Chest has been vital for that.” (Big Local rep)

Ten years into the Big Local programme, community grants continue to enable partnerships to establish new or strengthen existing connections with residents. They do this by providing a means for broader groups of residents to take ownership over the actioning of Big Local priorities (see Rastrick Big Local example on page 14), encouraging groups and individuals not already engaged in Big Local activities to apply for funding.

Community grants were also a key part of partnerships' COVID-19 response. For example, Hateley Cross provided a community grant to the local food bank, and Radstock and Westfield, unable to hold their 'Dragon's Den' event, reallocated their community grants fund to support a local café owner to distribute cooked meals to vulnerable individuals

and families. Big Local partnerships' time, skills and networks, combined with being able to provide small amounts of funding, have enabled them to be a key contributor in COVID-19 emergency response and recovery efforts. Some areas have continued to focus their community grants on building back after COVID-19.

Establishing new connections in Rastrick

One of Rastrick Big Local's priorities is supporting the availability of 'a high-quality physical environment'. Their community grants programme has provided a means for them to connect with new groups in the community, encouraging them to come forward with their ideas for how this priority can be achieved. For example, the local football club approached them for a community grant towards new changing facilities as a way to improve young people's participation. They had seen a drop off in participation once the young people using the football club reached a certain age, particularly amongst girls, because of the lack of changing facilities.

3.2 Building local capacity

Involvement in community grants not only provides residents with the skills to apply for funding, but also aims to equip them with the knowledge and skills to turn ideas for community activities and initiatives into reality, giving residents greater confidence to initiate or get involved in community action:

"We want to support local people to do things themselves ... building capacity in the area. And provide support for groups to develop and formalise ... and continue Big Local beyond the end of the programme." (Big Local partnership member)

The kinds of support being provided by the four partnerships includes: assistance with writing applications; guidance about

how to set up a project, group or organisation for community benefit; and signposting to further funding and support.

Big Local partnerships have found that providing this support, alongside an initial small grant, has enabled groups to go on to apply for larger grants to grow and sustain their ideas. Their aim is to "prepare groups to continue and sustain beyond Big Local funding" (Big Local partnership member – see Rastrick example on page 15).

Community grants have also helped partnership members to feel more confident about getting involved in broader partnership discussions and decisions about larger sums of money. Incubating partnership members in small groups (such as community grants panels) has helped build skills and confidence amongst members, so they feel more confident speaking up in larger partnership meetings.

Building confidence and skills in Rastrick

For Rastrick Big Local, building local capacity is the primary purpose of their community grants, enabling individuals, groups and organisations to get new ideas off the ground. To them, it does not matter too much what is funded (as long as it meets basic due diligence requirements), it is about building skills and confidence and a chance to do something different. Examples of recent community grants awarded include funding a group of young mothers to improve their local playground, a 'Bricks for Kids' project which uses Lego as an educational tool (now a successful business), a pilot sewing project and an art group.

Rastrick Big Local have also supported and encouraged groups to formalise their set-up, for example by becoming constituted, to increase their eligibility for further support and funding. This enabled Rastrick Plays Better, a group that received a community grant, to receive funds from Tesco and Co-Op community funds and restore five playgrounds with new equipment. Similarly, a group of four mothers living in Woodhouse raised over £90,000 of funding to restore their local playground after receiving a community grant. Both these groups became constituted with support from Rastrick Big Local and the Voluntary Sector Infrastructure Alliance Calderdale, developing policies and strategies that allowed them to access new funding streams.

3.3 Enhancing the local VCSE sector

Community grants have the potential to enhance the local VCSE sector by contributing to the conditions that create stronger communities. Residents are using community grants as a means to innovate but also sustain and enhance existing local provision. By supporting local infrastructure like community hubs, they are helping to ensure groups and organisations have a place to connect with each other and grow in the longer term.

Sustaining and enhancing existing provision

Community grants and similar small, place-based grants are often a fundamental resource to local organisations and groups (Thomson and Caulier-Grice, 2007). Even for those organisations that may have access to larger pots of funding, for example schools and uniformed groups,

community grants can help to fund things like one-off activities or equipment costs that fall outside of their designated project budget or core costs.

Partnerships recognise the importance of existing groups having access to small grants to enhance or keep activities going. In turn, by supporting them, Big Local partnerships stay connected to key groups in the community, establish new connections and strengthen their networks – connecting with other residents, community leaders and local agencies.

“We are seen as a go-to organisation, for example when town traders were looking to open up after Covid, they talked to the Town Council and ourselves ... we are seen as a key local contact and group.” (Big Local chair)

Activities related to community grant making therefore help Big Local partnerships to become a more

significant part of the local infrastructure.

Supporting new ideas and activities

Community grants provide an important space for the incubation of new ideas and activities, helping to ensure the local VCSE sector continues to be responsive to changing local needs and contexts. The additional support Big Local partnerships provide alongside community grants can help get new ideas off the ground, whilst keeping one eye on how groups might sustain or grow these activities in the future.

Investing in local community infrastructure

As the Big Local programme enters its final phase, partnerships were thinking about what their legacy might be, in terms of sustaining local infrastructure that supports local groups and Big Local activities becoming a more integral part of that infrastructure. For example, in Hateley Cross the grants committee plans to fund The Hub, a space used by many local groups serving the area. By investing in this space, the partnership is helping to continue to provide small groups and organisations with a physical home, a space to connect with others and sustain or grow their activities.

Occasionally small grants are being used to support the planning of a capital project where a community group wishes to improve or repair their building:

“This is an ex-coal mining community, so there are lots of community clubs and social clubs. Sometimes we use small grants to support these groups with business plans for larger projects, so they can make applications to bigger pots of funding.” (Big Local chair)

Big Local partnerships hope that directly investing in local community infrastructure

or buildings will help to strengthen the position of local organisations as they recover from the after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as sustained closure or reduced income. The work of IVAR and others on the post-pandemic recovery of the charity sector also emphasises the importance of giving voluntary and community sector leaders time and headspace to plan for longer-term recovery (Dyson, Firth and Taylor, 2021).

3.4 Summary

Across the four Big Local partnerships we saw examples of where their community grants programmes are contributing to broader community outcomes, including:

- developing engagement with Big Local
- building local capacity
- enhancing the local VCSE.

Community grants continue to enable partnerships to establish new or strengthen existing connections with residents. They do this by providing a means for broader groups of residents to take ownership over the actioning of Big Local priority areas and encouraging groups and individuals not already engaged in Big Local activities to apply for funding.

Big Local partnerships see their role as going beyond grant making, wanting to also offer wraparound support to residents – such as assistance with writing applications or guidance about how to set up a project. By doing so, their aim is to build local capacity and equip residents with the knowledge and skills to turn ideas for community activities and initiatives into reality.

Community grants also have the potential to enhance the local VCSE sector by contributing to the conditions that create stronger communities. Using community grants as a means to innovate but also sustain and enhance existing local provision.

Conclusion

Community grants play a valuable role in supporting local communities and can bring long term benefits (Buckley and Taylor, 2017; Turner and Moran, 2022 and Thomson and Caulier-Grice, 2007). The four Big Local areas in this research use community grants to:

- **help sustain existing community activities and infrastructure**
- **support new ideas and activities**
- **provide the seed funding needed for some groups to secure further funding and grow or sustain their work.**

We also saw how community grants, situated within the framework of a Big Local partnership, contribute to developing and enhancing community control. They provide a means through which resident volunteers can engage with their community and reach out to new groups, giving residents control over how small pots of money are spent.

However, simply having a community grants programme in place is not, on its own, sufficient to ensure it is accessible to and led by residents. During the action research, a key focus for the four areas was on identifying ways to improve access to their community grants programmes and ensure they adopted fair and transparent grant making processes. Areas sought to mirror changes being adopted within the wider funding sector, looking at simplifying application processes and exploring ways to help mitigate the power imbalance in decision making (IVAR, 2021).

For Big Local groups, the intended impact of community grants does not start and end with the grant but forms part of their broader priorities to build local capacity and encourage community action. In this way, community grants are a mechanism for extending partnership reach, by encouraging groups and individuals not

already engaged in Big Local activities to apply for funding. This helps partnerships establish new connections and strengthen their networks – connecting with other residents, community leaders and local agencies.

Partnerships also offer support alongside the grant, using it as an opportunity to build capacity and equip residents with the knowledge, skills and confidence to turn ideas for community activities and initiatives into reality.

As the Big Local programme is entering its final phase, partnerships are thinking about where and how they might enhance the local voluntary and community sector beyond the lifespan of the partnership, with some choosing to use community grants to help sustain local hubs and infrastructure.

Community grants are a flexible tool in the Big Local model, used in a range of ways to support community action right at the grassroots. When led by residents – the people closest to the needs of their communities – community grants provide a small but significant resource to get new ideas off the ground, enhance existing provision, bring people together and make areas better places to live.

Ensuring grant programmes remain relevant and responsive to the context in which they operate requires building in space for reflection, review and adaptation. The action research with the four partnerships shows the value of setting aside dedicated time and space to think through challenges and make adaptations to the grant making processes.

This research has shed light on the strategic, practical and relational elements of successful community grant making in Big Local areas. Partnerships can find more advice and tips in the guide on designing and delivering community grant programmes in Big Local areas.

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Appendix 1: Research approach

In the initial stages of the research, we carried out three scoping interviews and facilitated a workshop with Local Trust staff to feed into a framework for community grants in Big Local areas. This framework enabled us to build on research by Local Trust (2020) and on-the-ground perspectives from Big Local partnerships.

This study used action research to support four Big Local partnerships to develop their community grant making. We used the following criteria to select suitable partnerships to work with:

- a specific interest and need to develop their community grants
- a relatively large amount of Big Local money left to spend
- applications to their community grants programmes had reduced since the COVID-19 pandemic
- ability to form a working group to attend four action research workshops
- not already committed to other Local Trust research.

Four Big Local partnerships were selected in October/November 2021, with fieldwork carried out between November 2021 and March 2022. We carried out:

- **twelve bespoke, facilitated action research sessions**, three in each of the four Big Local partnerships, spread out between November 2021 and March 2022. The sessions were tailored to the context and needs of the Big Local area, led by an IVAR facilitator and researcher, and attended by a working group. The working groups were generally formed of residents sitting on the Big Local partnership board, including the chair, staff employed to support the Big Local partnership, and in one group's case, an employee from the LTO. The action research supported the Big Local partnerships to review and adapt their community grants, including reviewing

their approach to community engagement; identifying ways to simplify the application process; and looking at ways to extend reach to encourage applications from new groups and new ideas. In between sessions, the IVAR researcher supported partnerships with putting any identified actions into practice. Areas determined the focus of the sessions according to their context and needs, but during the process we were able to gather information and insights relating to the research questions specified by Local Trust.

- **three interviews with other Big Local areas** using community grants in different ways, to gather additional insights for the research questions.
- **reading of key documents** for the four areas involved in the action research, including reviews of partnership plans and grant documents produced by participating Big Local areas.
- **a cross-area 'Share & Build' workshop** with participating Big Local partnerships in March, which focused on sharing and consolidating learning and co-designing a guide on designing and delivering community grant programmes for other Big Local areas.

We conducted this research exclusively online because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Doing so presented challenges and ethical concerns – for example, some people struggled with the digital skills to work online and where this was the case, researchers provided extra support or alternative platforms. It is also less easy to build rapport with participants in an online forum and the team was mindful of this when facilitating the sessions, building in an ice breaker to help people 'arrive' in the space.

Additional contact points between sessions supported dialogue between researchers and participants and thought

went into wrapping up conversations and collecting feedback about the process. We also found benefits to working online,

including bringing partnership members together at convenient times and across geographical boundaries.

Appendix 2: Community grants framework

Drivers	Approaches	Intended outcomes
Identified need for funding for local groups and initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thematic funding pots established (young people, older people, green spaces). • Hardship funds set up to support vulnerable individuals (COVID-19). • Funding for popular activities (keeping good stuff going). • Additional specific funding to cover staff support time during the grant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increases access to funding for local activities and organisations/groups, for example, sports clubs, scouts, schools. • New groups/organisations/activities established that did not previously exist. • Partnerships become more aligned with the needs and interests of the community.
Increase Big Local partnership's reach within the local community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outreach work to encourage applications, for example, through funding events or a Big Local paid worker. • Connecting with other local fundraising/support offers. • Funding subcommittees to engage more residents in decision making, for example, young people. • Range of methods used to engage the community: Dragon's Den/pitching to a panel format; website that allows people to 'donate allocated tokens'; showcase-style event and then ballots to the community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase access to funding for a wide range of groups (get beyond 'the usual suspects' that receive funding). • Attract more people to Big Local's work. • Partnerships attract more volunteers/supporters. • Small groups get their first funding. • Big Local partnerships ensure Big Local funded activities are linked in with other things going on locally. • Small grants can complement a physical space/community centre, boosting social capital or building trust in a community centre.
Strengthening community infrastructure	<p>Building fundraising capacity and knowledge through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • providing advice and assistance on grant submissions • in-person support throughout the duration of the grant (for example, provided by a Big Local worker or other community development worker at the LTO) • providing guidance and signposting to further funding and support • funding existing groups. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Groups and organisations build resilience and sustain or grow their activities. • New activities or events funded through community grants are thriving/well attended. • Grants invest in people and help individuals develop new/strengthen existing skills and build confidence, for example, in decision making/leadership/fundraising. • Trust placed in individuals creates a sense of pride and confidence. • Community grants support local networks by giving residents/groups/organisations a reason to connect. • Grant making helps partnerships develop new skills.

About IVAR

IVAR is an independent UK charity. We seek to understand and strengthen civil society through action research. To do this, we work with people, VCSE organisations, trusts/foundations and statutory bodies to develop practical solutions to the challenges of creating social change. Our work is trusted and relevant, and has informed transformational change for people, communities and funders across the UK.

About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources, and decision making into the hands of communities.

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding, and to draw on the learning from our work delivering the Big Local programme to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

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

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