

Local Trust
trusting
local
people

PAR BAY



How to ensure a programme is resident-led

Guidance for practitioners
working with communities

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Local Trust

About this guidance

Local Trust has created two pieces of guidance for practitioners working with communities, focusing on [community control over assets in a resident-led context](#), and delivering a resident-led programme.

In this document we explore how to design and deliver community-based projects where residents take the lead. Our guidance is based on learning from the Big Local programme. You can find out more about Big Local on the [Learning from Big Local website](#). There is lots of guidance available about community engagement, volunteering, and working with community groups that you could consult and follow, so we don't explore those topics more generally.

This guidance is for practitioners working with communities to deliver projects where power is shared and residents lead or have a significant role in decision-making. While it is aimed at those involved in setting up large-scale resident-led programmes, practitioners working at a smaller scale can still use many of the principles and insights in their projects.

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www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk

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Front Cover: A celebration event at Cornubia Hub in Par Bay Big Local
Photo: Local Trust/Charlotte Sams



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Introduction

Big Local was the UK's largest ever non-state, place-based funding programme. The programme gave 150 disadvantaged areas over £1m each to spend over 10 to 15 years. Residents led decision-making for local investment, to make their areas even better places to live. An independent organisation – Local Trust – oversaw the programme and supported resident-led groups to understand their communities' needs and deliver local change.

Across the programme, over 4,900 residents led decisions on how £150m in Big Local funding should be spent in their communities.

For us, being resident-led means that the vision and all decisions about funding are taken by residents living in the communities that the funding is intended to benefit.

5 principles for delivering a resident-led initiative

These 5 principles are intended to help you design and deliver initiatives that put residents at the centre of leading decision-making.

Principle 1: Devolve power without burden



- Commit to the ethos
- Work with a local legal entity
- Delegate responsibility to residents
- Be flexible and open to different approaches

Principle 2: Put residents in charge



- Establish a decision-making mechanism
- Enable resident-led planning
- Plan for your initiative to end
- Help residents explore impact
- Provide long-term, flexible funding

Principle 3: Support growth and skills development



- Balance guidance and autonomy
- Adapt over time
- Prioritise building resident capacity
- Provide different types of support

Principle 4: Navigate human connection



- Plan for conflict
- Facilitate meaningful relationships with local stakeholders
- Respond when things go wrong

Principle 5: Make sure you are prepared



- Anticipate the scale of time and expertise needed
- Work at community pace
- Allocate enough funding
- Stay true to your resident-led values

Principle 1: Devolve power without burden

Give residents power in a way that is not overwhelming, so they can have real influence with shared responsibility. Funders' commitment, clarity, and support are essential for sustainable resident-leadership, especially in the context of limited historical trust, interest, or investment.

Find out how Big Local was designed to keep communities in control in [this online article](#).

Commit to the ethos

Shared power should be a golden thread through everything. People at all levels should see the value of being resident-led and commit to it. Values are as important as structure – being non-prescriptive, long-term, patient, non-judgemental, flexible, and responsive were crucial in Big Local. Resident-leadership works alongside asset-based approaches. See communities as assets and use an 'abundance model' – focus on community assets and strengths, rather than problems. You need to communicate your ethos, with simple messages and rules to ensure your programme remains resident-led. Challenge staff about their level of involvement – are they enabling and supporting, or are they taking the lead and making decisions?

Work with a local legal entity

Legal entities can help reduce the administrative burden on residents, enabling them to better focus on decision-making. These partner organisations can enter into contracts or legal agreements and operate as 'bankers' – receiving funding and taking responsibility for financial management, accounting, liability, and reporting. Residents should lead, so the partner organisation should focus on administration, not decision-making. With guidance on how to choose and what types of organisations are eligible, residents should choose who to work with. Funders should then carry out due diligence and enter a formal agreement with the organisation. Allocate additional budget to the partner organisation (proportionate to the amount of funding administered) so they can support residents and meet their responsibilities.

Find out about the role of legal entities in Big Local in [this online article](#).

Delegate responsibility to residents

Power should be acknowledged and the scope defined, to establish a strong foundation for resident-leadership. Reduce risk and liability on residents, for example by working with legal entities. Set helpful and reasonable expectations for residents, like doing only what they feel able to and not taking on too much. Let residents define their own involvement, for example by creating their own terms of reference or code of conduct. Establish the purpose for residents as being decisions not delivery, as decision-making is where power lies.

Be flexible and open to different approaches

Autonomy needs flexibility, so residents can choose how to work and what to achieve. Build flexibility into the programme, allowing residents to shape their ways of working. For example, the programme structure should allow for a resident-led group to change partner organisations, work with more than one, or become their own 'banker' as a legal entity. It should also allow for the resident-led group to define and recruit paid roles that support delivery. Support flexibility through certainty in funding (enabling residents to experiment), guidance (like outlining pros and cons of different approaches), and ideas for managing different working arrangements (like paying partner organisations for additional services).

Principle 2: Put residents in charge

Enable residents to take the lead by providing structure, support, and long-term stability that gives them the meaningful opportunities to shape their own processes.

Find out how residents worked together to make decisions in Big Local in this [online article](#).

Establish a decision-making mechanism

A resident-led group for decision-making can enable local change. Define what resident-led means in your programme and outline expectations for decision-making. For example, membership could be determined by residents (not funders), required to be majority residents, or locally representative of different characteristics and backgrounds. Outline decision-makers' roles and expected outputs, while being flexible about how they operate. Showcase different governance models (outlining advantages, disadvantages, and considerations), suggest how to establish policies and processes, provide advice for recruiting diverse members (particularly younger residents), and share practical ideas to reduce barriers to participation.

Enable resident-led planning

Planning support equips residents to efficiently and effectively achieve their goals. Be clear about why plans are expected and how they will help resident-leaders. Share ideas for informing plans (like collecting local data, community engagement, and sector learning) or questions to discuss. Guidance should outline what you expect (like a vision, priorities, and action plan), with achievable visual examples. Define funding requirements and related processes (like plan submission, assessment, and reporting), so it's clear why it's expected, what is needed, and how it will happen. Suggest ways to communicate plans to the wider community.

Help residents explore impact

Monitoring and evaluation are often new skills for residents, and targeted support can help reinforce legacy for resident-led groups. Provide flexible, specialist support to build evaluation skills – depending on the group's experience, this could require a more hands-on approach, with specialists helping to develop plans, gather and analyse data, or create reports. Support individuals to champion evaluation by engaging their peers, and make sure to signal the value of measuring impact in a proportionate, manageable, and resident-led way.

Provide long-term, flexible funding

Funding that is predictable, stable, and flexible provides an enabling environment for resident-led change. Accommodate variation between communities in history, context, starting points, and visions for success. This approach provides residents the freedom to act at their own pace, accommodate local change, and try things out with time to learn and adapt.

Plan for your initiative to end

Funding inevitably comes to an end and it's important to prepare so residents can maintain autonomy. Define what closure means – what it includes, administrative tasks, and what financial balance would be considered 'spent out'. Provide spending timelines early with a full spend target at least a few months before the programme's end, to cater for underspend or delays. Provide checklists and guidance for different phases and equip residents to prepare for closure (like considering risks, budgeting, communications, ending relationships, and closure costs). Encourage early thinking about legacy and what will remain when funding ends.

Principle 3: Support growth and skills development

Equip residents to lead decision-making and local change themselves, for example developing their skills in leading groups, building relationships, raising funds, and shaping legacy.

Find out about [how support was delivered in Big Local in this online article](#), [how Big Local built residents' skills and confidence in this online article](#), and [in-area support in this online article](#).

Balance guidance and autonomy

Support should provide essential knowledge, but not be so prescriptive that it compromises residents' autonomy in decision-making. Guidance that is comprehensive but flexible (with minimal rules), enables residents to find what works for them and develop their own approach, while avoiding miscommunication. For example, rather than prescriptive instructions on creating a plan, provide questions for them to discuss, issues to consider, and example documents. Giving residents the opportunity to learn from their own experience and mistakes will help them continue as resident-leaders beyond the end of your initiative. So, while there will be support that you consider necessary, make space for residents to inform your offer.

Adapt over time

Support should respond to residents' journeys, growing as they become established and shifting focus as their activities develop. Plan to identify development needs on an ongoing basis – resident-led groups will progress at different paces, and membership will shift over time. Use different channels to identify those needs, including formal data collection (surveys, interviews, or participation data) or informal feedback (through in-area support or events). Adjust support based on resident input and learning on what worked, when it worked, and who found it most useful. Provide a clear pathway for participants to input into developing and adapting the support – not just through feedback on a particular offer, but through ongoing communication.

Prioritise building resident capacity

Practical help and additional capacity should build residents' capacity and skills. Extra capacity (like in-area support, employed workers, and volunteers) can help the resident-led group realise their goals. However, more importantly in the context of a resident-led programme, it helps residents focus on their own development and strategic decision-making. Supporting roles should enable rather than direct – they should not take the lead or make decisions, but be 'critical friends', with their actions and support being led by residents.

Provide different types of support

Support should reflect and respond to residents' experiences, diversity, cultures, needs, and focus. Provide a comprehensive package of options, in a consistent format to clearly communicate who each option is for and how it can help. Ensure that residents can relate to the language in your offer – for example, residents might not consider themselves as community leaders and could be put off by support advertised as 'community leadership development'. Support options could include **guidance** (with important process information, how-to toolkits, or ideas for delivery); **in-area support** (for guidance, reassurance, empathy, and coaching as residents learn to lead); **specialist and technical support** (to equip them for more complex tasks); **training and events** (to develop skills on specific topics); and, the most-valued support, **peer-learning** (to share ideas and learning).

Principle 4: Navigate human connection

Embrace the (sometimes messy) relational side of resident-led action for community change. Preparing for conflict, fostering trusting relationships, responding constructively when things go wrong, and providing time through a long-term programme helps residents to work through challenges, develop conflict management skills, and lead with confidence and resilience.

Find out about the nature and opportunities of conflict in Big Local in [this online article](#).

Plan for conflict

Resident-led approaches redistribute power, and changing established power dynamics can cause conflict. Create clear routes for residents and other project roles (like paid workers) to follow when they experience conflict. This guidance should include how to submit a concern; the information needed and why; who reports are shared with; and the expected timeframe for action. Outline the funder's organisational approach to conflict and their anticipated role in addressing it. Support those involved to resolve the issue locally, for example through in-area support workers.

Facilitate meaningful relationships with local stakeholders

Stakeholder relationships are important for responding to community need, but it takes time to develop trust and relational skills. Invest in resident networks and making connections between organisations. Provide guidance on how the resident-led group and their partner organisation can collaborate with each other and other delivery organisations, like an outline of what to include in agreements. The scale of funding can influence relationships – it can put resident-led groups and stakeholders on equal footing, and provide residents with valuable negotiating power. In-area support workers can play an important role in facilitating and nurturing productive relationships, as their support creates a strong foundation and provides capacity for more time-consuming relationships, like those with local government. Build trust among stakeholders in residents' abilities to make decisions and control resources in a way that meaningfully influences local change, and identify champions in those organisations that can help to shift mindsets about the value of a resident-led approach.

Find out what helped residents build relationships with local government in [this online article](#).

Respond when things go wrong

Despite planning and support, there will be times when things go wrong and more targeted intervention will be required. Clearly communicate routes to follow when things go wrong (like unacceptable behaviour in the resident-led group, or unsafe situations), along with information about what to do, how information will be shared, and the general timeframe for response. Where local resolution is unsuccessful, you may need to provide alternative options (like mediation) or take a more active role in further intervention (like independent chairs). If a situation proves to be unresolvable, having tried many options over several years, only then should the programme's inbuilt flexibility allow for an alternative approach that moves away from being resident-led. For example, in Big Local, a few resident-led groups were disbanded and alternative arrangements put in place, where other local organisations continued to honour earlier input from local communities and deliver projects for community benefit.

Principle 5: Make sure you are prepared

Create the conditions for confident, sustainable local decision-making by having enough time, expertise, funding, and trust to back resident leadership.

Find out about keeping communities in control in [this online article](#).

Anticipate the scale of time and expertise needed

Substantial time and expertise, both in-house and externally, is required to support resident-led decision-making. Everything discussed in the previous principles takes time to embed and you need a central system to monitor community needs and organise the right support in response. In-area support workers played a crucial role in assisting in resident development and acting as a 'critical friend', but the initial capacity needed in this role was high, as it took a long time for resident-led groups to establish and get to a point of delivery. Be prepared for delivering a range of specialised support, by creating a roster of providers with different areas of expertise (like evaluation, community participation, assets, and governance).

Work at community pace

Communities are diverse and residents will progress at different paces over time, the programme needs to respond to those variations. It takes time for residents to develop confidence, shift thinking about their area and role as leaders, and build stakeholder relationships. Communities often anticipate being able to deliver quickly or underestimate how much capacity and time is required to deliver on their ambitions, and (particularly in the early phases) will have to adjust their plans. Be prepared for slow progress at the beginning – it's worthwhile to spend time building skills and capacity. Later, be prepared to act quickly in response to opportunities, as activity will ramp up and peak delivery will come. Different resident-led groups will also progress at different rates and need different things at different times. While some groups are still in peak delivery, others may be moving into their final years, requiring a shift in focus to move onto legacy and planning for closure.

Allocate enough funding

The funding organisation, partner organisation, and resident-led initiative all need to be allocated enough funding. Allocate enough funding to run an organisation effectively and commission support – costs will be incurred in building internal processes, setting up workplaces, carrying out due diligence, and providing programme oversight. Having sufficient funding and a team of central and in-area support staff in place will also enable a proactive rather than reactive approach in identifying and responding to community needs.

Stay true to your resident-led values

Over time, all community-led work will face challenges, and it will be important to remember the original ethos and values of the programme. Try different solutions to problems that maintain those values. You might feel like an alternative model is preferable to dealing with ongoing – sometimes significant – challenges in some areas, but only resort to an alternative model once all other options have been exhausted. Focus not just on getting the work done, but on what can be done to build the capacity of residents and ensure that decision-making continues to be resident-led. When options are exhausted and a more traditional approach must be taken, this should still engage residents in some way (like allocating small grants or as volunteers) and stay true to what the community wanted.

What now?

Local Trust produced an extensive library of insights and learning from the Big Local programme, alongside stories for each of the 150 areas and their work, all of which is available on [Learning from Big Local](#).

The following articles are particularly relevant:

- **Building on assets, The Local Trust approach:** A research report about Big Local's approach, how it developed, and its strengths and challenges.
- **How did Local Trust support Big Local partnerships to evaluate their work:** An article summarising how Local Trust enabled partnerships to engage in evaluation.
- **What was the role of paid workers in Big Local:** An article discussing the crucial role of paid workers in Big Local and how they were supported.
- **How effective was the Locally Trusted Organisation model in supporting community-led work:** An article exploring the support provided by legal entities to resident-led groups, and the skills development and challenges faced by the entities.
- **How did Big Local enable residents to lead decision-making:** An article about the conditions for and people involved in resident-led decision-making.
- **What does success mean in Big Local:** An article exploring what success meant in Big Local, based on work with 15 Big Local areas.
- **How did residents develop their own abilities to deliver Big Local:** An article discussing how residents developed skills and confidence through Big Local.
- **How was community leadership supported in Big Local:** An article about different forms of support for leadership skills.
- **What were the support needs of Big Local areas, and how were they identified:** An article detailing how Local Trust provided for residents' support needs.
- **How did the long-term, flexible Big Local funding support and enable community power:** An article about how funding can generate and sustain community power.

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.

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