Local Trust | Big Local

A level playing field

How sport can unite and transform communities

Ryan Herman

About the author

Ryan Herman has been writing about sport for over 25 years in national newspapers, websites and magazines. Former editor of Sky Sports Magazine and a current contributing editor for Director Magazine, Ryan's work has been published in FourFourTwo, Vice, SportBusiness International, The Rugby Journal, Gallop and BT Sport. In October 2019 he was appointed Local Trust's second journalist-at-large, reporting on community experiences of our changing social and political landscape in Big Local areas.

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P7: Cavendish Park, Barrow Island. Credit: Local Trust/Shaun Hayton
P14: The 2018 Klondike Grand Prix, East Cleveland. Credit: Local Trust/Jonathan Turner
P36: Anchorians FC Kodiaks training session at Luton Arches. Credit: Local Trust/Stephen Perez

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FOREWORD

BIG LOCAL IS ONE OF THE MOST radical and exciting grant programmes ever launched by a major lottery funder. Between 2010 and 2012, the National Lottery Community Fund identified 150 areas that had historically missed out on lottery and other funding. Each of those areas was allocated £1m of Big Local funding. This could be spent in any way they chose, provided residents organised themselves locally to plan and manage that funding, involving the wider community in the decision-making process.

Often these areas missed out in the past because of a lack of the local social and civic infrastructure needed to bring people together to apply for lottery grants or organize themselves to tackle big issues in their community. Big Local was therefore designed from the outset not just to provide funding for projects, but to do so in a way that would build community capacity, confidence and skills in the longer term.

The rules, constraints and priorities that define Big Local have been for local people to decide. By design, the programme is bottom-up and community led; there are no top-down targets or centrally imposed delivery models. The timeframe for Big Local extends over fifteen years, allowing communities to take their time, build confidence and skills, make decisions and deliver change, without the usual pressures to meet end-of-year- spend targets or other arbitrary, bureaucratic deadlines.

The activities and initiatives that Big Local areas have chosen to support reflect the diversity of the communities

themselves, but across the country, sport features time and again as a major area of investment. In this essay, Ryan Herman explores the short- and long-term impact of sport in communities, from curbing child malnourishment and crime rates, to nurturing young female leaders, to addressing community cohesion. We see how residents of Big Local areas have collectively developed the skills, networks and confidence to continue to lead their areas into the future, through sports initiatives.

Since the 2012 Olympics, the country has continued to ponder the question of lasting legacy from sport. Herman asks whether the greatest enduring benefit of sport is in fact the 'soft legacy' of local communities and lives changed.

This is the latest essay in a series in which Local Trust has invited a range of writers, thinkers and researchers to help understand the context and relevance of Big Local. From the benefits of investment in social infrastructure, to releasing the potential of young people, to the role of creativity in building sustainable communities, these essays look at the programme from multiple of angles. The aim is to draw out lessons that can inform wider debates on shared prosperity, community and place.

We hope that 'A level playing field' provides a similarly important contribution to another critical public debate.

Matt Leach
Chief executive Local Trust

INTRODUCTION

Sport is the great British success story of this decade

WE EXCEL AT HOSTING AND COMPETING in major events—few products have been exported as successfully as the Premier League, and the London Olympics was almost universally hailed as a triumphant statement by a new, confident Britain.

Sport is also one of the few aspects of modern British life that succeeds in uniting us on a mass scale, irrespective of class, race or politics. Its importance stretches far beyond basking in gold-medal glory or winning a penalty shoot-out.

And as factories close, local shops get boarded up, town centres become ghost towns, and so-called 'tough decisions' have to be made about council services, so a team, an event or a sporting institution becomes the one constant, the real heartbeat of a local community.

To quote British playwright David Hare, "A city isn't a city without a post office, a football stadium and a theatre."

But one could argue that—despite lottery millions flowing

into sport, and ever-increasing media coverage—there is a growing disconnect between consumption and participation.

At the last count, 210 school playing fields have been sold since 2010. And it's not just a matter of blaming the current government; land was being sold off at a similar rate under Labour. However, before 2012, schools in England were required to have at least 5,000 square metres of outdoor space for children to play on. Now, a school simply has to provide 'suitable outdoor space', whatever that is.

In December 2018, *The Mirror* reported: 'The UK has lost 1,295 grass pitches, swimming pools, sports halls and athletics tracks during the past two years.'

And, following a season in which English clubs were overwhelmingly dominant in European football, *The Guardian* published a story in June 2019 revealing that '700 council football pitches have been lost since 2010.'

And nationally, Sport England's recent funding strategy has seen a significant move away from the funding of sport for its own sake, towards a more general goal of promoting physical activity across the population.

But if national and local government are scaling back from their support for sport, at a neighbourhood level we have seen many Big Local areas—communities benefiting from £1m each of lottery funds to spend on their own priorities—placing sport, or sport-related projects, among their top priorities when deciding how to spend their own resources. This has sometimes been because facilities and playing spaces were either under threat or inaccessible, or had simply disappeared; and often because, at a grassroots level, there has always been a strong understanding of the value of sport to community and place.

To explore this idea further, I visited five Big Local areas to see how sport is helping to rebuild communities. I also wanted to find out what happens more generally when those

communities are put in charge and given the opportunity to shape the future of their own neighbourhoods.

While there is an ongoing debate around what sort of legacy is, or isn't, being created by Britain's sporting success on the world stage, can projects driven purely by local interests actually be more effective when it comes to delivering lasting and meaningful impact?

Cavendish Park, Barrow In Furness

Part One

Barrow Island, Cumbria

"We're forging more relationships, which I don't think could have been happened without this. If you build it, they will come."

'HOW TO BUILD A NUCLEAR SUBMARINE' is a BBC documentary, first broadcast in 2010, about the making of Astute—a multi-billion-pound feat of modern engineering which, in terms of scale and complexity, has been likened to constructing an underwater space shuttle.

Each Astute submarine is built on Barrow Island by BAE Systems in Devonshire Dock Hall—an indoor assembly complex big enough to accommodate several football pitches, also known as Maggie's Farm, because it was opened by Margaret Thatcher in 1986.

The submarines are fitted with a nuclear reactor and, when the first Astute was launched nine years ago, BAE Systems had to publish a booklet for people who lived nearby titled, 'What to do in the event of a radiation emergency'.

However, as local resident Eric tells the camera crew, "People around here are more worried about where their

next shilling is coming from."

Across the UK, prosperity can often find itself rubbing shoulders with poverty, but Barrow Island is a special case in point.

Barrow-in-Furness is very much out on a limb, close to the border between Lancashire and Cumbria. It is often called Britain's longest cul-de-sac, because there is only one A-road in and out of town and it's 33 miles to the nearest motorway. Barrow Island is a further mile out and exists in the shadow of the 160-acre BAE Systems site.

Its economy has long since been at the mercy of international conflict. Submarine building began here in 1886, but the end of the Cold War meant thousands of people weren't going to work on Maggie's Farm no more. Now that geopolitical instability is back on trend, BAE has invested millions in new facilities and won billions in new contracts.

In stark contrast, little has changed for the islanders, many of whom reside in tenement blocks built in the late 19th century, when people flocked here to work at the world's largest steel mill.

During that boom time, Barrow Island's Cavendish Park became home to the town's rugby and cricket clubs, and it is said that W.G. Grace once played here. There was even a velodrome built at 'Cav Park'.

When war broke out in 1914, the land was requisitioned and the sports teams moved to Barrow-in-Furness, never to return.

Over the years, other clubs that called Cav Park home had to take their ball and find somewhere else to play, or simply stopped playing altogether.

This included Marsh Hornets, a junior Rugby League team that has produced a string of professional players, including

current Castleford Tigers hooker, Jacques O'Neill.

Around 12 years ago, the running of Cav Park was handed over by Barrow Borough Council to the Playing Fields Association, who turfed out the Hornets in favour of senior men's football teams.

It was only through the sheer determination of people like Rob McAloone, a sports coach and director of the Barrow Island Community Sports Trust (BICST), that the Hornets is still going.

Matt is a church warden and Chairman of the Barrow Island Football Association. He coached youth teams here for over 30 years and says that kids were also eventually barred from playing football on Cav Park. Barrow Island Primary School's sports day suffered a similar fate.

But it wasn't just ball games that suffered.
Joanne has been running the Islanders Dance Troupe for over 20 years. She explains, "When the old community centre closed [in 2007], the only way we could practise was by dancing outside on the backstreets. Sometimes that would be on rainy nights, or we would gather in somebody's house. We'd have so many girls in one room and so many in another, just trying to do whatever we could to keep it going.

"We've got 54 girls so the idea of putting them all in someone's house wasn't ideal!"

And as local amenities shut down, so crime went up.

Located on the edge of Barrow Island, Egerton Court may not be central, but it's the epicentre of the community's problems. Last year, following a spate of drug-related deaths, the media descended on the 'Ego'. Tenants may have dependency issues or have been recently released from prison. Meanwhile, absentee landlords don't have to worry about a

property being trashed or taken over by drug dealers, as long as they receive a cheque from the council.

Across the road from Egerton Court is the Grade-II listed Devonshire Buildings. You can immediately spot the difference, because the well-maintained blocks have their window frames painted white and the brickwork is clean. Egerton Court has barely seen a lick of paint. Some windows are smashed, others are boarded up.

In other words, Egerton Court isn't typical of the area as a whole, but because of all those years of setbacks, cuts and a lack of investment, Barrow Island was an obvious candidate for Big Local support.

Bob, a former Rugby League referee and chair of BICST, recalls that people kept saying, "What are you going to do with it [the million]?" "So we said, "Well, what do you want to do with it?"

Much like in Tesco or Waitrose, when you collect a token and choose a charity, residents were asked how they would like to spend the money and put tokens into pots. Bob says that around 90% of the imaginary fund went into the pot marked 'Sports and Community Centre'.

Bob and Rob McAloone are two sides of the same coin. Bob is a pragmatist, whereas Rob is more of an idealist, but they both care passionately about Barrow Island.

Rob attended the first Big Local meetings and says, "We were being advised to spend £10k here, £10k there. That wound me up because I thought we could do most of that stuff ourselves."

Bob adds, "We contacted the council to say, 'We need somewhere to build a community centre.' They said, 'Where could you do it?' and we said that Cav Park was the only place. They agreed but said, 'We need the lease for the land and the

lease for the pitches.'"

Once those leases were agreed, the islanders effectively took over the playing fields that once used to be prone to flooding. Now they are properly maintained and are so good that teams from 10 miles away come to play here.

The new hub in Cav Park opened in May 2018. At around £650,000, it is the largest sports-related Big Local project in terms of cost, most of which came from the £1 million budget, but also through donations from Cumbria County Council, Sir John Fisher Foundation and WREN, a non-profit which awards grants for community projects.

England and Manchester City footballer (and Barrow resident) Georgia Stanway attended the grand opening, and the cutting of the ribbon was conducted by Matt —a fitting gesture for a man who has given so much of his life to community work on Barrow Island.

"To know that we can give the kids a facility like this has made us all feel ten feet tall", he says. "I came here when I was 22 years old, I got married and stayed here ever since. This building has been the main change for the community."

Now that Joanne and her dancers have a new home, they are winning tournaments. "It was such a relief to tell the other kids that we had somewhere that we could go, and that dancing could carry on. A community relies on having a place where people can go, do activities and meet up. It wasn't just me who struggled without it."

This summer Cav Park once again hosted Fudstock—a festival in honour of local musician Richard 'Fud' Thorne—which last year raised £38,000 for a local hospice. Police estimate that the 2019 festival attracted around 3,000 people.

Councillors and landlords are using this facility to hold meetings and tackle some of the island's problems. Events are

put on for pensioners who previously had nowhere else to go.

For Rob, in particular, it's much more than just bricks and mortar.

"Back in December, I was rushed into hospital with a brain tumour. I had surgery and, because I was a scaffolder, I wasn't allowed to go back to work. This place has kept me focused and kept me going. I could have easily slumped into depression.

"My close friends and family have helped me through, along with lads I played rugby with when I was younger—the community you build around yourself. Some people have told me off for doing too much work here. But they understand why I've done it.

"Me and Bob are always meeting up to walk our dogs and we talk about what else we do to improve things. Our missuses must think we're having an affair. 'You're going out with the dog again? Right, okay.' But we meet up and we put the world to rights.

"Our vision is to get a transfer of assets from the council and give it back to Barrow Island so the community can run it."

To anyone who doesn't live here, the hub may simply look like a functional building at the end of a muddy slip road, albeit with a kitchen to die for and shower facilities as good as some professional clubs.

But the hope is that it represents something bigger: a turning point, after so many years of setbacks, closures and negativity, that will continue to serve the people of Barrow Island long after Big Local ends.

Or, as Rob says, "I see this as the start of something. We're forging more relationships within the community and beyond which I don't think could have been happened without this. If you build it, they will come."

The 2018 Klondike Grand Prix, East Cleveland

Part Two

East Cleveland Villages, North Yorkshire

"The more and more I had somebody in my face telling me, 'You cannot do this, you are not physically able to do it,' the more it made me just go, 'Screw you, I can and I will."

THE TOUR DE YORKSHIRE IS THE UK'S BIGGEST annual spectator event in our sporting calendar. An estimated 2.6 million people lined the streets to watch this four-day race in 2018[1]. Not bad, when you consider that it only started in 2014.

Councils apply for the right to host the start or finish of a stage, and this year there were 18 bids for one of the eight slots.

The event is run by Welcome to Yorkshire, the tourism agency for 'God's own country' (as Yorkshire is often described); but the build-up to this year's race was

1 The estimated figure for 2019 was 1.96 million. Tour de Yorkshire website (no longer available).

overshadowed by the controversial departure of its chief executive, and critics questioning whether councils should be spending around £150,000 on hosting a stage of a bike race while also wielding the axe on public services. And all this was happening in the run-up to the local elections in May 2019.

To counter those arguments, Welcome to Yorkshire pointed to an economic-impact study compiled by Leeds Beckett University. Based on a survey of 3,000 people who attended the Tour de Yorkshire in 2018, it estimated that the race was worth £98m[2] to Yorkshire in terms of money spent on accommodation, travel, food and so on. Plus, the live coverage that the race receives on ITV4 could be viewed as a four-day-long TV advert for the county[3]. Beat that for brand awareness.

Looking from the outside, what appeared to get lost in all this is what the race means to the people.

East Cleveland Villages Big Local is on the outskirts of North Yorkshire and was once home to a thriving mining industry. The last ironstone mine in North Skelton closed in 1964, a point in time from which the area has never really recovered. As former Big Local Chair Mary Lanigan says, "We've always been out on a limb here."

And while the Tour de Yorkshire was transforming neighbouring towns and villages into a week-long street party, East Cleveland hadn't received an invite.

Each Big Local area presents its own unique challenges, and it is hard enough to get consensus on how to spend £1million from people who live in the same street, let alone across a cluster of villages spanning 11 miles from Dunsdale to Easington, with a combined population of around 14,000,

[2] The estimated figure for 2019 was £60m. Tour de Yorkshire website (no longer available).
[3] The estimated worldwide viewing figure for 2019 was 28m. Tour de Yorkshire website (no longer available).

ranging from 5,000 residents in Loftus to 200 in Margrove Park.

Mary adds, "The villages had their own identity. When Big Local started, it was extremely difficult to get things done. I got frustrated. But you've got to make decisions and sometimes people don't like it. You can't have eleven different people saying, 'Do it that way.'"

Mary is well versed in the machinations of local government politics, having recently been appointed for her second stint as independent leader of Redcar and Cleveland Council.

"There's been some extremely strong views expressed from me for certain people to back off, because this is about community."

Local Trust insists that the money should be spent on projects that will serve the community as a whole. Given East Cleveland's lack of visibility and the Big Local programme target of 'making people feel better about their area', the founder members of the East Cleveland Villages Big Local took a unique approach and decided that investing in tourism would become a priority.

This was the challenge facing Jayne Barnard when she became Tourism Officer for East Cleveland Villages in 2016.

The strapline of the job description was 'Put East Cleveland back on the map'—easier said than done, when you also consider that Whitby and the North York Moors are virtually on its doorstep.

Soon after taking up her new role, Jayne was watching the Tour de Yorkshire whiz through the streets of Great Ayton, just outside of the Big Local catchment area.

"It couldn't have lasted more than 15 seconds," she says. "But they put bands on, they shut the roads, everyone was happy and smiling."

She realised a solution was staring her in the face, if only for 15 seconds, and that a similar event could galvanise those 11 villages around one grand project—a bike race to rebuild a region.

"My view was, if Great Ayton could make this amount of effort, what could East Cleveland do? We're lucky because we have moorland, woodland and coastline here."

She spoke to Velo29, a company based in Leeds that stages cycling events across the north of England, and the management were immediately sold on the idea.

The next step was to come up with a title. 'Riding the Klondike' sounds like something that has been around for years, rather than a name recently conjured up by former Big Local worker, Mike Jefferson.

As she takes me on a guided tour of the course, Jayne explains, "People from all over the UK would travel to Skinningrove to mine iron ore and the locals nicknamed it the Klondike. Iron ore was the gold of the North East.

"Mike said, 'We need something that people are going to remember,' and it worked because it has raised the profile of this area."

So, the East Cleveland Klondike was pitched to British Cycling, who loved it so much they decided it should be part of what is currently known as the National Road Series.

You don't have to be a pro cyclist, or an amateur for that matter, to appreciate why British Cycling was instantly sold on the Klondike.

The riders hurtle downhill through Brotton into Saltburn, which features a steep winding road, known as the Saltburn Bank, from the seafront to the promenade. This is followed by a punishing and sustained 600ft uphill climb through Skelton into Boosbeck.

The course takes you through villages and the countryside, past local landmarks, including the fairy-tale cottages at North Shire, through to a grandstand finish in Guisborough.

But while Jayne faced an anxious wait for British Cycling to rubber stamp and approve a race route, it was also a race against time to get every other potential stakeholder to give it the green light.

"The more and more I had somebody in my face telling me, 'You cannot do this', the more it made me just go, 'I can, and I will.'

"It was a constant diet of evening meetings, press releases, posts on Facebook, any platform that I could find and use to meet with people.

"A lot of people had said, 'It's nothing to do with us,' because they expected it to fail—not in a negative way, but simply because it's the nature of the beast. The people of East Cleveland are so used to being told, 'Put a Post-it note on a noticeboard and tell us what you want and then we'll take your money somewhere else.'

"Then British Cycling said yes. Suddenly those doors opened."

The first Klondike was held in April 2017 and was covered live in the UK by Eurosport, with highlights of the race broadcast around the world. It also received further exposure through the BBC, cycling magazines, websites, blogs and local media outlets. The race itself featured riders from across Europe and was won by Team Wiggins rider, Chris Latham.

On race days, the streets have been lined with green-and-gold bunting and people have knitted cycle jerseys, spray-painted bikes, painted houses, held street parties, put on cycle surgeries, set up food stalls and hosted live entertainment.

It's not been without its dramas. A mix-up over the

attendance figures led to a visit from anti-terrorism police. But this year, for the first time, 85 of Europe's elite women riders tackled the Klondike.

Meanwhile, Mary is optimistic that the Tour de Yorkshire will finally be coming through East Cleveland in 2020, although the route won't be confirmed until December.

Former New Skelton delegate Julie speaks for many in East Cleveland when she says, "We need to make sure this continues beyond Big Local. [If it didn't happen] you'd think, has it all been worth it? Well, of course it has, for that one day. But beyond that, it would be devastating to lose it."

Originally, East Cleveland Villages Big Local committed £145,000 over three years, which, excluding certain operational costs, expired in 2019. In late September, an agreement was struck with Velo29 meaning the Klondike will return in 2020, with further talks expected with potential sponsors to see if it can be extended to 2022. By any rational measurement, the Klondike exceeded all expectations.

As yet, nobody has done an economic study of the Klondike. Jayne says, "When I was asked by the Local Trust, 'How do you measure success?' I said the success is simply that it happened."

But there is another way to judge its impact, which is by no means scientific but demonstrates how a bike race has helped to restore confidence and pride to this disparate group of villages.

On a drizzly, slate-grey Saturday afternoon, Boosbeck Village Hall is preparing for an American diner night, and the walls are lined with pictures of icons from the golden age of Hollywood.

When they held the first Klondike, this building was locked up. At that time, Paula was the Boosbeck delegate for

East Cleveland Big Local.

Paula says, “Since the mines shut, we’ve had nothing. Even the Post Office closed down. And there is a knock-on effect because people have to go elsewhere to do anything, and whatever money they have to spend is being spent elsewhere. So, you can understand why people sigh and say, ‘I don’t want to get involved,’ because the spirit is lost.

“But the Klondike gave us the confidence to think we could make a difference. We had a meeting and I said to the committee, ‘All of us who have pulled together on the Klondike, I bet we could work together to open up the village hall.’

“A lady came along from the Village Hall Association of Great Britain. At that meeting, anyone who wanted to be involved put their hands up to say, ‘I want to be a trustee.’

“We formed a committee, we secured an alcohol license and we’re now talking about extending this hall. If it wasn’t for the Klondike, this wouldn’t have happened.”

Part Three

Arches Local, Chatham, Kent

"Why is it more important to be a winner here? It's because nobody expects us to win and everyone is expecting us to lose."

BOXING LESSONS FOR PEOPLE SUFFERING from Parkinson's disease sound like one of the most counterintuitive things you can possibly do for somebody living with that condition.

Yet there is a growing body of research which says that replicating elements of the training methods around movement and coordination can help to slow down the progression of Parkinson's and be of particular benefit for anyone in the early stages.

In 2017, St Mary's Amateur Boxing Club in Street End Road, Chatham, became one of the first gyms in the UK to start hosting these sessions, run by Olympia Boxing—a partner of Luton Arches Big Local.

The programme brought together people across a range of ages, all learning to cope with a disease for which there is no cure. It is just one of the many ways that boxing continues to

play a central role in this community.

Around 20 years ago, Channel 4 was home to 'The Other Side'— a series of short films broadcast some time after midnight, when the demographic tended to be students, stoners and insomniacs. No subject was too random, and stories could range from a profile of music impresario Malcolm McLaren to following a group of Scotsmen obsessed with a Class 37 diesel train. Really.

'Chatham Jack: A Boxing Legend' is one such film, which tells the story of Jack Edwards, a celebrated boxer who moved to Chatham in 1910 and coached a string of amateur champions. The Edwards family lived on The Brook, which is described in the film as one of the hardest and toughest areas in England. Chatham was a military town, The Brook was home to 30 pubs, and things tended to get a bit lively at chucking-out time.

It takes just 50 minutes to get to Chatham from London Victoria Station and it could be a prime spot of commuter-belt territory. Instead, Chatham is a hard sell for estate agents and still has a reputation for being a fighting town.

But Olympia Boxing and Luton Arches Big Local, along with council-run Medway Sport, have found more positive ways to promote pugilism.

On the day that I visit they are running another ground-breaking pilot scheme, called Boxfit—a seven-week programme designed to measure the impact of training sessions on a child's mood and behaviour.

The sessions are run by Lewis, a 20-year-old national amateur bantamweight champion. He says, "Wayne Smith [Olympia Boxing Director] approached me to get involved with Olympia Boxing and Big Local. I thought to myself, 'I get to train and coach boxing all day? That's the perfect

job. Sweet as!'

"You can be very easily led into doing bad things here. Without boxing, I don't know where I'd be right now. It could have been prison."

There are around 60 carded boxers at St Mary's, which means they've had medical clearance and are deemed fit to box competitively.

Lewis adds, "Without St Mary's you wonder what those 60 boys and girls would be doing next. To see people dealing or doing drugs is normal. I've seen it since I was a kid."

The boxing club has been going strong since the 1920s. In more recent times it was supported by a benevolent landlady who allowed St Mary's to pay a peppercorn rent. But since she passed away in 2011, this local institution has been under constant threat of extinction.

Millennium Green is the proposed location for the new St Mary's, which will become a multi-purpose facility. The Big Local area has committed £50,000 to a project that will cost around £250,000 in total, and also has support from Sport England and Medway Council.

Located just under a mile away from Big Local's Luton Road office, Millennium Green had become the destination of choice for drug dealers, users and sex workers, while simultaneously turning into a no-go zone for everyone else. Between February 2017 and January 2018, there were 108 reported cases of violent and sexual crimes around this part of Chatham.

So, Big Local started a regeneration project to clear up the green, rid it of the disused needles, stop it from being overrun with fly tipping, and turn it into a community space. The project in itself was a success but also revealed another troubling aspect of life here.

Stephen Perez is the ex-chair of and current worker for Luton Arches Big Local. He explains, "Part of that project was to create a community bench and the kids would carve their pictures onto it. They would come into the park during the summer holidays and most of them were saying, 'Can we have something to eat?' We would say, 'Haven't you had any lunch?'

"We'd heard about holiday hunger but we hadn't seen it for ourselves. The thing is, you get great contrasts here. You're either obese or emaciated."

So, while some kids are living on a diet of food served in cartons or boxes, for others, their only regular meal is a school meal.

Stephen adds, "At that point, I thought, we need to do something about this. Some of it is driven by poverty. But sometimes it isn't about money. It can be chaotic lifestyles that impact on the kids. Also, how many takeaways have you seen here?"

It's a rhetorical question, but within a half-mile stretch on Luton Road between two primary schools, you will find Topz Pizza, Cheers Pizza, Frydays Fish & Chips, Golden Curry, Tom's Takeaway, The Gandhi Tandoori, New Favourites Chicken, Open Rice, Red Cow Carvery, Turkish Delight Kebab Shop and Original Best Kebab (which is probably neither 'original' nor 'best').

Now, those kids can take part in the Fit and Fed programme that runs during school holidays at the one primary school which has a playing field (if Kent is the garden of England, then this part of Chatham is more like the concrete jungle).

It means children can do a range of sports from football to archery, but also make new friends from other schools. Crucially, they are guaranteed to get at least one good meal a day.

As we talk to a succession of youngsters at Luton Junior School, what becomes clear is that, if Fit and Fed didn't exist, most would be stuck at home, playing computer games or watching TV and doing hardly any exercise.

Stephen also views sport as a chance to bring this community closer together.

After being diagnosed as diabetic and told he would never be able to play football again, Stephen shed 10 stone in 18 months and took up a coaching course. He now runs the Anchorians FC Kodiaks football team, which should be nicknamed the United Nations.

"I thought I would put together a team made up of kids from Big Local and whoever wanted to play, would get a game."

Around 50 per cent of all households here don't own a car. So, Stephen and Luton Arches Big Local organise the travel and provide help with kits and playing fees.

"The team is diverse. The area is diverse. We've got one boy from Mongolia, another one is from Slovakia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, India, Poland... I was speaking to one person recently who moaned that there are too many foreigners at the doctor's surgery and that sort of thing. But the football team is a great example of diversity working."

Stephen preaches a high-press game—he's the Jürgen Klopp of the Medway Messenger Under-10s League, if you will – and players have attracted the attention of professional clubs, including Crystal Palace.

"It isn't easy because we're asking them to work hard. From the beginning, I also wanted to ingrain the idea of being nice. The kids said, 'What? Even to the other team?' I said, 'Especially to the other team, because when you're not nice they will try harder [to win].'"

Even if the kids questioned the method, they couldn't question the results.

"Before Christmas, we were struggling. Three or four of the boys are from single-parent families. So, one parent might take them to a game, the other might not.

"Having lost 11-0 to a team before Christmas, we didn't lose another game, we played that same team in the MMYL Cup final and won 3-1.

"But 70% of this team wouldn't be playing football if it wasn't for Big Local. On the one hand, it's great we're able to do this. But it raises the wider question, about why are these kids not able to play football without us?

"Our schools aren't the greatest, we've got problems with drug dealing and dependencies. We've one school field for three primary schools. We can't afford to access secondary schools, and they don't want us there anyway."

Then Stephen says something that sticks with me, about how kids from areas like Luton Road are judged, and why sport, even if only for a moment in time, gives them a chance to level the playing field.

"Why is it more important to be a winner here?" he says. "It's because nobody expects us to win and everyone is expecting us to lose."

Anchorians FC Kodiaks training session

CONCLUSION

THROUGHOUT THIS TOUR OF WHAT COULD BE CALLED England's alternative sporting heartlands, whenever I asked a child, 'What is the best thing about doing sport?', the immediate response was almost always the same: 'Making new friends.'

Another consistent theme, echoed by the adults, was that kids simply don't play as much sport as they themselves did at a similar age. This observation was usually followed by a hand gesture to imply that those children spend all their spare time playing computer games.

But sometimes that's because there isn't another option. Until Barrow Island Big Local took over Cav Park, kids would be indoors playing whatever version of FIFA on a PlayStation because they were not allowed to play the real thing on a pitch just a few yards away.

There is still an ongoing debate about what exactly the London Games achieved beyond the event itself, because simply inspiring people to do sport is worthless if they've got nowhere to play.

In an interview with Director Magazine from 2010, Seb Coe said that creating a lasting legacy out of the Olympics would be by far the biggest challenge.

"It is not about the project management, because smart people work these things out; it is not raising money, because we are doing that very well; and it is not the challenge of building great teams.

"I think we all understand that a large part of the assessment of this is going to be what we leave behind. The softer legacies are always harder to achieve."

Those softer legacies can be playing football once a week or taking a bike ride or simply making friends.

And Big Local has enjoyed success in creating such legacies, because the people involved have a deeper understanding of the needs and deficiencies within their towns and villages.

As East Cleveland resident Paula Miller says, "If investment came into these villages, I think people would be surprised by what could be achieved."

In some respects, the hard work begins now, as each of those communities will eventually have to learn how to exist on their own without Big Local's financial support.

But in every case, what people in those communities have learned is how things work, the confidence to ask the right questions, and—to use the vernacular—'how you get shit done.'

And they don't have to look on from the sidelines, like some sort of frustrated touchline Dad, thinking, "We could have done a better job if only they gave us the chance."

"Why is it more important to be a winner here? It's because nobody expects us to win and everyone is expecting us to lose... Kids from areas like Luton Road are judged, but sport, even if only for a moment in time, gives them a chance to level the playing field."

Across England, 150 communities are using £1 million each to make their area a better place to live. They are part of Big Local, a resident-led programme of local transformation, described as 'perhaps the most important and ambitious experiment in community development ever undertaken in the UK'.

In recent years, community sport has ranked low on the agendas of national and local government. Yet many Big Local areas are choosing to prioritise sport when allocating their funds. The short-term benefits are easy to see; but dig a little deeper and the impacts can be far-reaching. In this essay, journalist Ryan Herman visits five Big Local areas where sport is helping communities to transcend physical, social and political boundaries and tackle some of their biggest underlying challenges.

This essay is one of a series exploring how people and places are changing through Big Local. Each essay considers the lessons of Big Local for institutions and policymakers interested in radical devolution of power and responsibility to a community level.

COMMUNITY FUND

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