

Local Trust
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BOURNE COMMUNITY HUB

Enabling community control over assets in a resident-led programme

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 [delivering a resident-led programme](#), and community control over assets in a resident-led context.

In this document we explore community control over assets in a resident-led programme, based on learning from the Big Local programme. You can learn more about Big Local on the [Learning from Big Local website](#). There is lots of guidance available about community ownership of assets, so this is not a comprehensive guide about asset-based projects, general community control, or community assets more broadly.

This guidance is for practitioners working with communities where residents are leading decision-making about buying, building, or managing assets (like land or buildings) to bring about positive local impacts.

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www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk

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Front Cover: Bourne Community Hub; a key project for Bourne Big Local
Photo: Local Trust/Richard Crease



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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 Big Local, over 200 community assets were created, purchased, or revitalised for and by residents. The programme highlighted that when communities have greater control over funding, significant amounts are directed to physical assets and spaces. These were a focal point for redressing previous lack of local investment, as seen with buildings closing or falling into disrepair, and open spaces declining or becoming inaccessible. Assets and spaces helped increase visibility of resident-led groups (especially in their early years) and helped create lasting local legacy, leaving a reminder of how residents can improve their communities.

In the context of this guidance, community control is about residents leading on decision-making in the acquisition or leasing, management, and future of an asset. Here we are dealing with assets like land, buildings, or other significant physical features (not just community halls or hubs) in the local area, and not personal property or smaller assets (like computers or vehicles). These assets offer space for local activities and services, act as symbols of community pride and involvement, and encourage community engagement.

5 principles for enabling community control over assets in a resident-led programme

These 5 principles are intended to help you support residents and resident-led projects in getting and keeping assets in community control.

Principle 1: Devolve power responsibly



- Tap into community skills
- Adapt to context
- Protect residents
- Create or engage with a legal entity

Principle 2: Equip resident leaders for asset control



- Provide guidance and learning opportunities
- Provide specialist support with business planning
- Facilitate acquisition
- Support day-to-day management
- Ensure continued community control

Principle 3: Ensure the asset meets resident needs



- Make sure that the asset and control is the right choice
- Go beyond hubs and halls
- Make (and keep) the asset relevant
- Define and protect the purpose of the asset

Principle 4: Be a connector



- Connect residents with key players
- Enable positive relationships
- Build credibility

Principle 5: Plan for the future



- Set up for financial success
- Be adaptable and forward looking
- Support continued resident involvement

Principle 1: Devolve power responsibly

Put communities in control of assets by sharing power in a way that's considerate, clear, and protects residents.

Tap into community skills

Residents and communities may have a variety of relevant skills for controlling assets. Establish what knowledge and skills exist among the resident-led group that is involved in the asset-based project, and use that to inform what additional or specialist support may be needed. Consider what skills may be available beyond the group (for example among those using the asset or the wider community) and how they could fill gaps in capacity or support the initiative in other ways.

Adapt to context

Communities have varied contexts, histories, starting points, and visions for local assets. Communities have different assets and needs; for some, it will be best to take on an asset themselves (setting up a legal entity or working with a partner organisation) while others might be able to make use of an existing asset without taking it on. Be flexible and support residents in using different structures in response to their community's specific context. In Big Local, one community chose not to create a formal 'friends of' group due to residents' negative perceptions of authority. They focussed instead on shared responsibility, making activities open to all and communicated that maintaining the community asset was up to everyone.

Protect residents

Controlling community assets comes with a certain amount of risk, protecting residents will encourage their continued involvement. Clarify the roles of everyone involved – community practitioners, funders, residents, and partner organisations. Engage a legal entity to be accountable for the asset to protect individuals from personal risk and liability. Provide information for the resident-led group to make informed decisions about whether to create one or work with an existing one. Help protect individuals in the resident-led group by carrying out due diligence on the asset and legal entities involved. Provide guidance and technical advice on other practical approaches for residents to protect themselves from risk and liability. For example, advice on insurance that relates to their chosen structure for community control, or on lease exit clauses to make sure that residents and individuals are properly protected.

Create or engage with a legal entity

A legal entity is necessary to enter into legal agreements, manage funding, and limit individual liability. Provide guidance to enable the resident-led group to decide if they would like to create a legal entity or work with an existing one. Include information on the risks (like added responsibility), benefits (like enabling further fundraising), and duties of legal entities, along with ideas for how to have decision-making conversations. If the group chooses to create a legal entity, direct them to resources about the process (like government guidance about setting up a charity, social enterprise, or company), requirements (like the roles of trustees or directors), and tools for establishing policies (like data protection, and equality and diversity). If the group chooses to engage an existing legal entity, support them to choose a suitable organisation and establish necessary agreements. Provide flexibility for residents to choose alternative types of partner organisations (like non-charitable or cooperative) by focussing on the outcome – assuring long-term community benefit.

Principle 2: Equip resident leaders for asset control

Build resident capacity throughout the journey to help them grow as leaders, ensuring lasting impact and community control.

Provide guidance and learning opportunities

Residents should be supported to develop skills to successfully manage an asset. Provide varied support and learning opportunities, like guidance, toolkits, peer networks, in-area staff, and learning from other regional or national projects. Ensure shared understanding of what an asset is and its purpose. For example, you may want to focus on a park or a community hub, but these will have different elements that mean different things to different people. Cover varied themes, like planning (management, financial, and maintenance), discovering what's possible (shared learning or site visits), overcoming barriers, professionalising processes, and navigating difficult conversations.

Provide specialist support with business planning

Residents should lead business planning to embed community control from the start. Help them develop business plans by providing specialists (from the local community or a wider pool of support staff or organisations) to assess plans, provide feedback, and support with shaping changes. Resident-led groups operating as legal entities may benefit from specialised input on money management, to predict costs accurately; think creatively about income generation; create realistic budgets, forecasts and cashflows; or consider blended financing (like loans).

Facilitate acquisition

Asset acquisition is a key point for risk and challenges. Advise on different options for asset control, like comparing purchase to renting, long-lease, or asset transfer, and building new compared to improving or adapting existing assets. Carry out due diligence on the asset and organisations, to help residents understand if it will be a valuable resource or a liability – this might highlight make or break issues, or required maintenance and retrofitting. Connect residents with pro-bono or affordable specialists for legal advice and negotiations, ideally from the local area. Consider the role of funding in negotiations – it can help organisations take residents seriously in their ability to acquire and manage an asset. Ensure that agreements are in place, like a resident-led Memorandum of Understanding between the legal entity and the resident group (if separate).

Support day-to-day management

Communities will be responsible for managing the asset and its activities. Provide guidance, tools, and in-area support for establishing structures, processes, and policies on regulatory requirements (like accessibility, safeguarding, and health and safety), staff and volunteer management, and marketing. Help residents establish and nurture effective teams, with varied skills and qualities, shared values, supportive leadership, and tools to navigate conflict. Work with residents to explore how they can make use of resources in their wider area.

Ensure continued community control

Resident leadership needs to be embedded throughout acquisition and management, for long-term community control. This can be achieved by the resident-led group becoming a legal entity; residents making up a majority of trustees, directors, or company members of the partner legal entity; and establishing asset locks.

Principle 3: Ensure the asset meets resident needs

Pair ambition with practicality – sustained community control over assets will only work when the asset aligns with residents’ capacity, needs, values, and interests.

Make sure that the asset and control is the right choice

Public assets and community control can be appealing, but they are not always the right choice.

Help residents to understand the pros and cons of control over a specific asset, and consider whether it is suited to their situation. It might be preferable to explore other assets or other models for exerting influence over an asset without accepting responsibility for it, or to come back to the asset at a later point in their journey. Guide residents to clarify what they want to achieve, why, and when. Assist them in exploring different routes to meeting needs and interests, assessing if the asset will meet their goals, and understanding the risks. Support communities to carry out a realistic feasibility study (exploring viability and sustainability for the intended community use), and help them turn down unsuitable opportunities. Assist residents with carrying out due diligence and identifying any less-obvious risks or conditions to address through legal agreements. For example, some assets offered through asset transfer have more costs (e.g. for maintenance requirements) than potential to generate income, and you could encourage the asset-owner to enter into a funding-agreement as part of the transfer.

Go beyond hubs and halls

Community assets can be so much more than the usual village hall or community hub. Expand thinking among residents, stakeholders, and programme leaders about what is possible when it comes to assets that hold interest and value among communities. In Big Local, in addition to halls, centres, and hubs, communities established control over local authority buildings, health centres, shopfronts, cafes, pubs, theatres, lakes, parks, sports pavilions, open land, and green space. Enable creative thinking and experimentation by building flexibility into funding and programme design.

Make (and keep) the asset relevant

The wider community needs to find value in a shared asset to ensure its long-term future. Support the resident-led group to understand community needs to maintain the asset’s community value, by positively involving the wider community and grassroots organisations in design, planning, delivery, and review. Collaborating with local agencies and providing relevant services that local people value and are willing to pay for, in an attractive, welcoming, and well-used space, helps the asset to thrive and supports long-term financial sustainability. Equip residents to establish approaches to community accountability, monitoring, and understanding impact early in the process, so they can ensure that the asset continues to align with local needs.

Define and protect the purpose of the asset

Context, organisations, and ambitions change, and it’s important to ensure that community-benefit is embedded in the asset into the future. Support residents to define the asset’s purpose as being for community benefit. Ensure that this purpose is legally protected through establishing asset locks, covenants in title deeds, or restrictions in leases.

Principle 4: Be a connector

Facilitate constructive relationships where stakeholders see communities as trustworthy and credible, so residents are better able to influence decisions and manage assets with confidence.

Connect residents with key players

Networks and stakeholders can play an important role in supporting long-term community control of assets. Connect the resident-led group with key players in the local, regional and national system – like local authorities, public bodies, funders, specialists, businesses, national networks, other community organisations, and residents in the wider community. These stakeholders might be able to connect the resident-led group to opportunities for collaboration, funding, peer-learning, and connecting to other assets. Connections with other residents can help the group to involve the community in planning and decision-making.

Enable positive relationships

Positive relationships will be important throughout the asset journey, from before acquisition or leasing, to day-to-day management, and through to long-term legacy. The resident-led group and legal entity (if different) need to maintain relationships with the wider community and people using the asset, to enable communication and involvement that will ensure the long-term viability of the asset and community control over it. Collaboration with other community organisations, activities, and assets are more likely to lead to financial success and positive community impact than competition. Support residents to ensure a balanced focus between maintaining the physical asset and being people oriented.

Build credibility

Reputation among stakeholders is crucial to gaining and keeping community control. The scale, structure, and stability of funding impacts perceptions of community groups' capacity to successfully acquire and maintain public assets. Provide training and support for the resident-led group to establish their approach, structures, and internal processes in a way that is aligned with the sector and relatable for professional stakeholders. Professional ways of working help build confidence and trust among stakeholders about the community's leadership skills, governance systems, and ability to lease or own an asset. Build the resident-led group's reputation before they take on an asset – focus on cumulative small wins early on, which can help local stakeholders and leaders to trust and support them with assets projects later. Continued communication and engagement with the community and other local stakeholders will also be important for maintaining credibility in the face of delays in the asset-based project.

Principle 5: Plan for the future

Preparing for an asset's future means thinking beyond the handover and investing in long term resilience, ensuring that the asset remains stable, relevant, and community led.

Set up for financial success

Financial sustainability requires balancing cost and income, ensuring everything is well-organised, and maintaining accurate, up-to-date financial data. Ensure that initial agreements between organisations support financial sustainability, for example local authorities entering into a funding agreement as part of asset transfer to account for loss-making. Help residents to plan for all the costs (including service charges, utilities, and business rates) and anticipate working with limited reserves and tight margins. Support residents with ideas and examples of successful income generation (like venue hire or leasing out workspace), and how to maximise success through high levels of activity and diverse offers and income streams. Work with residents to explore the market, set pricing, and create a pricing policy for their income-generating activities. Help residents to prepare early for gaps in income or funding. It can take time to establish the asset and its activities, creating a gap between acquisition (or leasing) and profit-making – a stable base of funding and support can help the resident-led enterprise find its feet. Grants and funding will also come to an end, and planning for proportional income generation beyond initial funding will support long-term financial sustainability. Encourage environmental sustainability as a way of supporting financial sustainability through cost reduction, by providing toolkits for audits and retrofit planning.

Be adaptable and forward looking

Community control over public assets can be a varied journey and embracing change is a key factor for success. A long-term view and guaranteed but flexible funding are crucial for providing stability amid the sometimes inconsistent pace and unpredictable nature of this kind of work, like helping to mitigate negotiations that take years. Plan for the resident-led group to have changing capacity over time, particularly in terms of the asset size and financial stability – consider when the asset might realistically reach full capacity (as this may take more time than hoped for) and whether the resident-led group and its activities might outgrow the space in the future. Prepare for delay – asset acquisition (including long-term leases), building, and retrofitting takes time and presents unforeseen challenges. Build break-clauses into agreements (like leases and asset transfers), so that if the resident-led legal entity is unable to continue as an organisation they can step-back from controlling the asset.

Support continued resident involvement

Residents need to stay interested in supporting and taking part in managing the asset to maintain long-term community control. Support the resident-led group to consider how they will maintain motivation and commitment among existing members, and encourage new members. In Big Local, networks of reliable volunteers and high levels of activity in and around assets helped encourage and motivate resident-leaders in their work. Help the resident-led group to build and keep community trust, by delivering small wins, engaging the community in activities, communicating regularly, and ensuring transparency. Over time, this can help maintain community trust and support through difficult or lengthy asset projects, and through problems and delays.

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 and guidance are particularly relevant:

- **The Community Hub Handbook:** A detailed 'how-to' that draws on research to provide practical guidance for setting up and managing community hubs.
- **Community hubs, Understanding survival and success:** A research report about community hub organisations, the challenges they face and their impacts.
- **Activate! Land in the hands of communities:** A report about regeneration and social infrastructure in Big Local, looking at ownership, community power, and funding.
- **How did Big Local areas increase community control over physical assets and spaces and to what effect:** An article exploring how residents gained and maintained control over local assets, and the role of wider organisations and support structures.
- **Why were physical assets and spaces an important investment for Big Local areas:** An article about the role and value of community assets for residents and wider social infrastructure.
- **How was Big Local designed to keep communities in control:** An article about how core values kept communities in control.
- **How was community leadership supported in Big Local:** An article about the different types of support for developing leadership skills.
- **Ramsey Million:** Redeveloped a cricket pavilion and established a new legal entity to oversee management of the new community building.
- **Scotlands and Bushbury:** Secured an asset transfer and 25-year lease from the council, transforming a closing centre into a thriving community hub.
- **Whitley Bay:** Purchased and transformed an old Job Centre into a community eco-hub, with a café, community garden, and co-working facilities.

There are also many freely accessible online resources and guidance documents from other organisations around community ownership of assets, for example:

- **myCommunity:** resources and guidance covering community right to bid, community right to reclaim land, assets of community value, community asset transfer, community buyouts, community-led housing, and the Localism Act.
- **Locality:** resources and guidance covering business planning, governance, community asset transfer, community ownership and development of assets, and financial management.
- **Power to Change:** toolkits and how-to guides covering community power, community businesses, and community hubs.
- **Shared Assets:** examples, tools, and guidance covering community ownership, social enterprise, and community land assets (like community farms).

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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