



# Learning from Our Bigger Story

Synthesising ten years of research findings

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Date

May 2026



# Acknowledgements

Thanks to Paul Morgans, the Our Bigger Story film maker, Alice Perkins for support at residential, and to wider OBS team members – past and present. Particular thanks to the 15 Big Local study areas.



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# Glossary

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<b>Big Local area</b>	Big Local areas were neighbourhoods selected by the National Lottery Community Fund to receive at least £1 million. Local Trust worked with 150 Big Local areas.
<b>Big Local area coordinator</b>	Area coordinators were responsible for a portfolio of areas at a sub- or regional-level. They provided general guidance, advice, and challenge to Big Local areas.
<b>Big Local area advisor</b>	Big local area advisors were a pool of people contracted to Local Trust to provide specialist skills, guidance, challenge, and support to areas.
<b>Big Local partnership</b>	A Big Local partnership was a group of at least eight people, that guided the overall direction of a Big Local area. A majority were Big Local area residents.
<b>Big Local worker</b>	Big Local workers were paid individuals rather than volunteers, who worked with Big Local partnerships to support delivery.
<b>Big Local rep</b>	Big Local reps were individuals appointed by Local Trust to offer tailored support to a Big Local area and share successes, challenges, and news with the organisation. These roles ended in 2023, replaced by Big Local area advisors (see above).
<b>Big Local plan</b>	A Big Local plan was a document each Big Local partnership wrote for themselves, their community, and Local Trust. It was a guide and action plan that the partnership could follow, share, and use to get others involved. Each partnership was required to produce a plan.
<b>Community-led infrastructure</b>	Community-led infrastructure was a term used by OBS to describe the practices, structures, and agency that interact to help create lasting change. They include credible resident-led structures, connected networks of residents, effective relationships with agencies, and strengthened resident voice and influence.
<b>Locally Trusted Organisation (LTO)</b>	A Locally Trusted Organisation (LTO) was an organisation chosen by people in a Big Local area or the partnership, to administer and account for funding, and/or deliver activities or services on behalf of a partnership. Partnerships might have worked with more than one LTO depending on the plan and the skills and resources required.

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**Big Local** was a resident-led funding programme providing people in 150 areas in England with £1.15 million each to spend across 10 to 15 years to create lasting change in their neighbourhoods. The programme was run by place-based funder Local Trust. They believed there was a need to put more power, resources, and decision-making into the hands of local communities, to enable them to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live.

**Our Bigger Story** was a longitudinal multi-media evaluation that ran alongside Big Local, charting the stories of change in 15 areas to learn about the programme. Previous reports, along with photos and films to illustrate the journeys of Big Local partnerships, are available on a dedicated website, [Our Bigger Story](#).

# Executive summary



The Big Local programme was designed to be radically different from other funding programmes. It was initiated and funded through an endowment of over £200 million from the National Lottery Community Fund and managed by Local Trust. Running from 2010 to 2026, it provided more than £1 million of funding and support to enable resident-led change in 150 small areas across England. Big Local areas were encouraged to work at their own pace, to use their money according to their own plans and priorities over the duration of the programme.

Our Bigger Story (OBS) was a longitudinal evaluation which was done alongside Big Local from 2015 to 2025. It collected qualitative (non-numerical) data through a multi-media approach. The evaluation charted the stories of change in 15 Big Local areas (10 per cent of the programme), with a focus on gathering insights for learning. Research findings were reported on an ongoing basis throughout the research period. This report brings together key learning from across previous reports.

Funding and support helped build capacity, capability, and legitimacy in Big Local areas. Decisions were taken by residents, positive change was created, and amazing things were achieved. For many, this contributed to the realisation of agency and the power to get things done, embedded in enduring structures and processes of community-led infrastructure. This illustrates the potential of a programme like Big Local.

More generally, many residents' lives were made better through day-to-day activities, through the practices and processes involved in doing resident-led change, which together made their communities even better places to live. The new skills and capabilities that developed in areas through engaging in the practices of resident-led change generated a 'learned optimism' – a belief that residents could make a difference. Achieving this took long-term investment of money and support, alongside a lot of dedicated time, passion, and commitment from residents and community workers.

Following the 15 partnerships participating in OBS over a ten-year period showed that developing resident-led change is a highly iterative and contingent process, in which a set of complex factors interact. The pathway to change was not linear. There were ups and downs over time. And change does not look the same in each community. There is no single magic bullet to ensure the successful development of resident-led change. Synthesising the findings from Our Bigger Story highlights eight key learning points for resident-led change:

1. **Funding and support enable resident-led transformation:** When given control over non-prescriptive funding and access to appropriate multi-faceted support over a long time, residents can achieve significant change, making their communities even better places to live. Support is an essential addition to funding when aiming to build capabilities for resident-led change.
2. **Essential practices:** Resident-led change is achieved through a set of practices, each underpinned by skills and capabilities and facilitated by programme funding and support. Eight practices are particularly important to doing resident-led change well:
  - Listening to the whole community and identifying needs.
  - Creating a vision and being strategic.
  - Engaging and communicating with the wider community.
  - Developing shared decision-making structures and processes.
  - Delivering projects, activities, and events.
  - Managing and learning from conflict.

- Building effective relationships and working collaboratively.
  - Reflecting on what does and does not work and accessing support.
3. **Access to local resources:** To achieve resident-led change, communities need certain local resources alongside funding and support. The availability of these varies from place to place. These resources can be developed through the eight practices of resident-led change listed above, but may also be depleted without appropriate programme support. These resources are:
- Community capabilities.
  - Active residents.
  - Shared decision-making.
  - Community identity.
  - Community leadership.
  - Community collaboration.
  - Community spaces.
  - Legitimacy, trust, and emotional strength.
4. **Support and time to deliver lasting impact:** With the right funding and support, residents can develop the practices of resident-led change and build the local resources they need. These are important (interim) outcomes. They can also lead to wider changes (longer-term outcomes) in communities. These longer-term outcomes included those specified by the funder at the outset of Big Local: being better able to identify local needs and take action accordingly; having increased skills and confidence to continue to identify and respond to needs; making a difference to self-prioritised needs; and making participating communities even better places to live. Having a long timeframe is crucial to such outcomes – resident-led change is not a quick process.
5. **Progress is not linear:** Achievement of longer-term outcomes varies between areas, as they are affected by the conditions and resources available in each area, and the practices developed. This means that different areas progress at different rates. The journey to change is not smooth or linear.
6. **Resourcefulness in creating change:** With the right long-term funding and support, residents can be resourceful in creating change in their communities, leading to a new sense of optimism about what is possible. It can help develop agency to take decisions and create positive change. This optimism can be seen as an impact of resident-led change, but it is not inevitable, and it did not happen equally across all areas.
7. **Context influences potential and outcomes:** Context matters to the potential of programmes such as Big Local. The national political, policy, social, and economic context (and how it evolves over the period of a long-term initiative), has implications for all involved, but plays out differently across areas. At the same time, local contexts shape how each community engages with the programme, the journey it goes on, and the potential for achieving outcomes.
8. **Embedding sustainable structures and practices:** For lasting impact, resident-led change must be embedded through sustainable structures and practices. Resident-led change needs to be secured through developing community-led infrastructure, which includes:
- Holding a strong community vision.
  - Focusing on community change rather than activities alone.
  - Linking to wider strategic priorities and relationships.
  - Considering sustainability of community action.
  - Being visible and endorsed by the local community.



# 1. Introduction

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## 1.1. The Big Local programme

The Big Local programme was designed to be radically different from other funding programmes. It was initiated and funded through an endowment of over £200 million from the National Lottery Community Fund and managed by Local Trust. Running from 2010 to 2026, it provided more than £1 million of funding and support to enable resident-led change in 150 small areas across England. The first 50 areas were selected in 2011, followed by two more sets of 50 areas the following year. The Big Local programme specifically targeted communities that had not historically received Lottery funding, with selected areas being among the 20 per cent most deprived in the country.

Each area had to set up a resident-led partnership and over time put together a Big Local plan. They were supported in this by a Big local rep and a grants pot of up to £30,000. Each area selected a Locally Trusted Organisation (LTO) to hold and account for programme funding, while the partnership made the decisions on how funding was spent. Support was available throughout the programme from Big Local reps and, later, Area Coordinators and Advisors, who offered guidance and advice to areas, and acted as the eyes and ears of Local Trust. Additional ongoing support came through peer learning events, training programmes, and access to specific expertise.

Big Local partnerships were encouraged to work at their own pace and to use their funding according to their own plans and priorities, guided by four broad overarching outcomes:

- Communities will be better able to identify local needs and take action in response to them.
- People will have increased skills and confidence, so that they continue to identify and respond to needs in the future.
- The community will make a difference to the needs it prioritises.
- The area will be an even better place to live.<sup>1</sup>

## 1.2. Our Bigger Story

Our Bigger Story (OBS) was a longitudinal evaluation which was done alongside Big Local from 2015 to 2025. It collected qualitative (non-numerical) data through a multi-media approach. The evaluation charted the stories of change in 15 Big Local areas to draw learning about the programme. Summaries of each of the 15 areas are provided in appendix 1. OBS included conducted over 950 interviews and learning conversations, alongside workshops, focus groups, and diary-keeping. These were undertaken with residents, partnership members, Big Local workers, Big Local reps, Locally Trusted Organisations (LTOs), local stakeholders (e.g. councillors), support providers, Local Trust staff, and trustees. Filming was also an important form of data collection, including films created by residents and the research team as well as filmed discussions between people across the areas in OBS.

The evaluation was formative – designed to influence the programme by regularly sharing learning. By March 2025, the evaluation team had produced 12 reports, over 150 films, report summaries, blogs,

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<sup>1</sup> Local Trust (2025). About Big Local, <https://www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk/about>

and graphics. The approach and style of the reports and films varied over time. Early outputs were more descriptive, focusing on how the 15 areas were engaging with the programme and what resident-led change and community leadership looked and felt like to those involved. Later phases became more analytical, examining how issues played out across the different areas. The reports described both the progress of the Big Local areas and thematic learning about the process and outcomes of resident-led change. A summary of the 12 reports, and details of a paper outlining the Our Bigger Story methodology, can be found in appendix 2.

### 1.3. This report

This report brings together the OBS reporting, synthesising learning from across existing OBS reports and videos from 2015 to 2025. It does not contain new data or analysis. The report aims to answer the question of, *'What did we learn from the Our Bigger Story evaluation of Big Local?'* This meant refining learning from ten years of in-depth research with 15 communities and presenting it in a clear set of findings, while still reflecting the complexity and nuance of that learning.

First, the report outlines what went into the Big Local programme in terms of money, support, the time of volunteers and workers, and access to existing community facilities. It then describes what residents did and learned, and what was built as a result. We look at the difference Big Local made (both in areas and potential long-term change), and we consider how the wider context affected the programme. We conclude that Big Local partnerships achieved real change for their areas, but that this change is fragile.

Throughout the report we highlight key learning from OBS, which may be useful for future programmes. We also signpost original OBS reports which provide more detail on topics only covered in brief in this synthesis.

# 2. What went into the Big Local programme



## Key learning about the conditions of funding and support in Big Local

Residents can create significant change and make their communities even better places to live when they have control over funding, with little prescription as to how it should be spent, and access to appropriate, varied support, over a long time. Support is an essential addition to funding, to help build the ability of communities to bring about resident-led change.

The Big Local programme worked on an assumption that: *‘Long term funding and support to build capacity gives residents in hyper-local areas agency to take decisions and to act to create positive and lasting change’*.<sup>2</sup> As such, funding and support were identified as the two key programme interventions to build agency (the ability to act independently) and create positive change in communities. In this section we explore the conditions of funding and support that were central to how the programme developed.

## 2.1. Money

The three key features associated with Big Local funding were that it was long-term, controlled by residents, and non-prescriptive (there were few limits on how the money could be spent). These conditions were fundamental to the success of the programme.

### *Long term*

The funding was available to areas to be spent at their own pace, over a 10 to 15 year period. This contrasted with many previous community development and regeneration programmes which were shorter-term. Some areas benefited from taking three or four years to develop an initial plan, which would have been unthinkable in traditional, shorter-term funding programmes. The long-term, patient nature of the funding (and support) was repeatedly discussed by Our Bigger Story (OBS) participants as being a significant factor in their ability to achieve change. It enabled them to work at their own pace; work on short- and long-term projects (like housing and community centres); bring in extra funding; experiment with different approaches; and learn about what worked and what didn't as they went.

### *Controlled by residents*

Resident control of funding was put into practice by requiring the setup of local partnerships (with at least 51 per cent residents), to make decisions about how the money was spent. A Locally Trusted Organisation (LTO) was recruited by the resident-led partnership in each area to be responsible for administering and

<sup>2</sup> Local Trust (2020, July). Looking back on eight years of Big Local. *Local Trust blog*.

accounting for funding, and often to employ workers and deliver services on the partnership's behalf. However, they were not intended to be decision-makers.

Partnership control over how the money was used was seen as important in building residents' skills, gaining legitimacy, and opening doors to power and influence.

In practice, the extent that residents were collectively in charge of funding decisions varied between areas. It depended on various factors, including the relationship between partnerships and the LTO or workers, and whether local decision-making was inclusive. For example, some partnerships debated who could, or should, be considered a resident. In other areas resident control was a source of tension between the partnership and other groups and organisations (e.g. local authorities).

### *Non-prescriptive*

A third key feature of Big Local funding was its low level of prescription, particularly compared to previous community programmes. Partnerships had a lot of freedom to choose how money was used, beyond working towards the four programme outcomes. They were required to assess local needs and develop a vision and action plan. This meant learning to consult their communities, make shared decisions, and work strategically – important practices for resident-led change and for building local skills and capabilities (see chapters 3 and 4).



#### **Signpost**

The importance of funding for resident-led change, and in particular the conditions with which it is awarded, was discussed in many OBS reports. Our 2020 report, **Big Local as Change Agent**, included analysis of how the funding associated with Big Local contributed to it being seen as a 'catalytic change agent'. Funding and other resources were mobilised through Big Local, and this was fundamental to change. The report explores elements of the programme design and how they affected the change process.

## **2.2. Support**

Alongside money, the other key programme-level input into Big Local areas was support, which was designed to be consistent and varied in terms of form, function, and source.

### *Consistent, over the long-term*

Support was built into Big Local from the outset, with help available to residents throughout the whole programme. National support offers were consistently available to partnerships participating in OBS, alongside in-area support from Big Local reps and LTOs, with whom partnerships were often able to build long-term relationships. In most areas, funding was also invested in Big Local workers, who were employed by LTOs on behalf of the partnership, to provide sustained practical support by bringing skills, knowledge, networks, and additional capacity.

Long-term support enabled areas to progress at their own pace and access help when they needed it. Consistency also mattered for residents to develop relationships with support providers. However, levels of consistency varied. Over the 10 to 15 year period, most areas experienced at least one change in their rep or LTO, and these transitions could be disruptive, but also at times beneficial. In some areas a change of support provider was positive when relationships had been strained, or different support was needed in different stages of the programme. Crucially, consistency was not only about keeping the same providers.

It was also about being consistently available – being able to access the right support at the right time throughout the programme, not just at the start.

### **Multi-faceted**

Support was also effective because it was multi-faceted – it served different functions, took different forms, and could be accessed from multiple sources. In practice support provided six main functions:

- Providing skills development.
- Offering guidance and information.
- Building relationships.
- Enabling peer support.
- Providing technical expertise.
- Adding capacity to get things done.

Support was available from both national and local providers. Some provided directly by Local Trust (e.g. reps, Big Local Area Advisors, and events), while other forms were brought in by the partnerships themselves (e.g. community workers, project managers, and bespoke training provision and advice).

While support was always multi-faceted, the nature of Local Trust's offer evolved in response to emerging learning. Initially, support tended to be generic, fragmented, and in some cases at the discretion of partnerships. Over time the offer broadened in scope and incorporated more specialist expertise. Towards the end of Big Local, support became more directive, focusing on ensuring areas spent all their funding on time, and targeting those that needed help to do so.

The quality of support varied, and its timing proved important. When provided too early, there was a perceived risk of stifling residents' own efforts or being too directive. When provided too late, partnerships could be left to struggle unnecessarily. Some partnerships made fuller use of the support available than others. Uptake was affected by:

- Starting points of partnerships in terms of their skills and capabilities, and experience in accessing support.
- Awareness and perceived relevance of what support was on offer.
- Timing of support provision.
- Interest and confidence to take up the support on offer.
- Prioritising funding for capacity building.
- Certain restrictions or limits in the support offer.



### **Signpost**

Our 2023 report, **A delicate balance: national support provision in the Big Local programme**, examined the support offer in Big Local – what was offered, how it was accessed by partnerships participating in OBS, what they thought of it, and what affect it had. It concluded that there were tensions for Local Trust in providing support, including balancing the local with the national; mitigating risk with control; enabling flexibility and ensuring compliance; understanding supply and demand; and utilising both expertise and relational support.

# 3. Developing the practices of resident-led change



## Key learning on the practices of resident-led change

Resident-led change is achieved through a set of practices, each underpinned by skills and capabilities, facilitated by programme funding and support. Eight practices are particularly important for successful resident-led change:

1. Listening to the whole community and identifying needs.
2. Creating a vision and being strategic.
3. Engaging and communicating with the wider community.
4. Developing shared decision-making structures and processes.
5. Delivering projects, activities, and events.
6. Managing and learning from conflict.
7. Building effective relationships and working collaboratively.
8. Reflecting on what did and did not work, and accessing support.

The previous chapter considered what went into Big Local from the national programme level to facilitate resident-led change at the area level. Here we turn to the practices for resident-led change that residents developed through Big Local. Our analysis identified eight practices as being central for effective resident-led change. Each was underpinned by, and contributed to the development of, a mix of skills and capabilities (discussed further in chapter 4). All the partnerships taking part in Our Bigger Story (OBS) demonstrated these practices, though to varying degrees, which contributed to differences in the programme outcomes that were achieved (chapter 6).

## 3.1. Listening to the whole community and identifying needs

Listening to the whole community and using the knowledge to identify needs is a vital first step – and ongoing practice – in resident-led change. All Big Local areas were required to develop plans (at their own pace), based on assessments of local needs and priorities, often through consultation with residents. Consultation methods included street surveys, community questionnaires, conversations at public events, drop-ins, doorstep conversations, and working groups. One partnership commissioned a consultation which engaged over 1,000 people, which was also used to influence the local authority's planning processes.

Residents learned both how to consult and what their community needed. While some partnerships were inclusive in their consultations, reaching across the whole community, others were more partial in their coverage. Similarly, some developed a good understanding of diverse needs, while others focused on 'wants'. In several areas, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed previously unidentified needs and worsened existing ones, prompting partnerships to develop new understanding and revisit their original or latest plans.

## **3.2. Creating a vision and being strategic**

Having a vision for the future of the community, and working strategically to achieve it, is a second important practice in resident-led change. All areas had to assess needs, create a vision, and develop a plan. This enabled partnerships to be proactive and reactive, and to solve problems. However, some were more strategic than others in their approach. Being strategic involved making decisions using all available evidence, prioritising needs and actions, planning ahead, making connections, identifying opportunities for financial and policy leverage, and dealing with immediate issues.

Over time, being strategic also involved learning what did and did not work, and acting accordingly. This strategic reflection was often a new area of learning for many residents. Many partnership members reflected that they became more strategic as time went on. However, for some it was an ongoing struggle, with implications for wider programme progress.

## **3.3. Engaging and communicating with the wider community**

Meaningful resident-led change requires the involvement of the whole community, so communicating with and engaging residents is a crucial practice. All the Big Local partnerships in the OBS sample worked to raise awareness of the programme, using methods like leaflets, events, doorstep conversations, and street stalls. Despite these efforts, levels of awareness, understanding, and engagement in Big Local varied between areas. Often, residents only became aware of Big Local when opportunities arose to get involved in something that was meaningful or relevant to their own lives. The practice of community engagement is often challenging, which is discussed further in section 4.1.

## **3.4. Developing shared decision-making structures and processes**

Beyond the requirement that Big Local partnerships include at least 51 per cent residents, there were no formal requirements as to how they should be constituted or structured. So, developing appropriate and robust governance arrangements was crucial to enabling shared decision making. In some areas, the partnership was the central point of decision-making and delivery, while in others decision-making was more shared, such as with volunteers in the partnership's sub- or working groups.

Strong governance structures supported shared decisions and helped widen resident involvement across the area. One area, for example, developed a set of thematic working groups, each with shared responsibilities, which supported wider community engagement. The strength of governance structures varied between areas, impacting the extent and effectiveness of shared decision-making (discussed further in chapter 4).

## **3.5. Delivering projects, activities, and events**

Delivering activities that reflect the community's vision for change is another key practice of resident-led change. In each OBS area, partnership delivered a wide range of projects and activities based on the priorities identified in their plans.

# Delivering projects, activities and events



## Events

- Consultations
- Fetes
- 'Dragon's Den'-style funding sessions



## Environmental improvement projects

- Litter picks
- New play parks
- Reviving natural habitats



## Services

- Youth clubs
- Job clubs
- Exercise classes



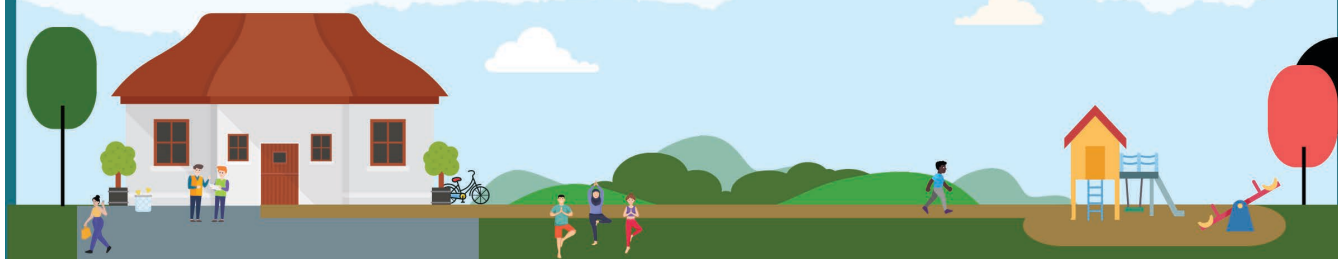
## Major capital development projects

- New community centres



## Community groups

- 'Friends of' green spaces
- Arts and heritage groups



- Events (like consultations, fetes, or 'Dragon's Den'-style funding sessions).
- Services (like youth clubs, job clubs, or exercise classes).
- Community groups (like 'Friends of' green spaces or arts and heritage groups).
- Environmental improvement projects (like litter picks, new play parks, or reviving natural habitats).
- Major capital development projects (like new community centres).

For many partnership members, delivering projects was a significant learning curve, as they had little previous experience. Over time, partnerships became more confident in delivering projects, including negotiating with and working alongside external providers. However, the challenges associated with delivering some of the larger-scale projects – particularly developing community hubs – should not be underestimated.

## 3.6. Managing and learning from conflict

Managing conflict – and learning from it – is an important practice in resident-led change. Working together in Big Local communities and with external organisations could be a turbulent process. Where residents found it hard to work together, they encountered challenges in developing and delivering their plans.

Across the 15 partnerships participating in OBS, at least five experienced conflict with a Locally Trusted Organisation (LTO), often about decision-making and control. At least six faced issues in the partnership itself, like disagreements over plan priorities, or perceived conflicts of interest amongst partnership members. Occasionally, partnerships came into conflict with other groups over leadership or decision-making roles.

Most tensions were managed through mediation and conflict-resolution processes. The long-term nature of the programme also enabled residents time to work through and resolve issues, building stronger relationships in the process. Navigating tensions required skills and confidence and was a significant area of learning for many partnership members. Learning to 'disagree well' was a practice that partnerships developed with varying levels of proficiency, with implications for how the programme unfolded and the differences they were able to make.



### Signpost

Conflict was discussed in several OBS reports, as it interacted with various themes discussed in those reports. For example, in discussing the goals and progress to date of each area, the first OBS report in 2016, **Our Bigger Story: The first chapter**, identified 'high passions and disagreements versus neighbourhood relationships' as one of a series of balancing acts that partnerships were having to navigate.

## 3.7. Building effective relationships and working collaboratively

All partnerships participating in OBS worked collaboratively with other groups and organisations, including local authorities and voluntary sector bodies. These relationships often took time to develop and were sometimes challenging. Over time, partnership members developed their understanding of the key bodies operating in their area, how they related to each other, and where power and resources were held. They also strengthened their skills to build relationships with diverse stakeholders.

As collaborative working improved, partnerships became more skilled at assessing external organisations' capacity, constraints, and political will. Some partnerships became more skilled at this than others, and some operated in local contexts where external partners were more open to collaboration. This is discussed further in section 4.6.

## 3.8. Reflecting on progress, learning, and support needs

A final important practice for resident-led change is being able to reflect on progress, refine plans, and identify support needs. Although Big Local reporting requirements were minimal (see section 2.1), all partnerships were expected to participate in regular reviews, including submitting reviews of their Big Local plans to Local Trust. These reviews included reflection on their activities and achievements to date.

More generally, the long programme timeframe enabled partnerships to try things and reflect on what did and did not work, what they were good at, and where they might need more support. Participation in the OBS research was seen to facilitate this, as the research team regularly prompted and facilitated reflective practice as part of the evaluation. Big Local reps and wider programme initiatives also provided frameworks for structured reflection. These reflective practices helped refine area plans, while also facilitating personal

and partnership-level development, and the identification of support needs. However, for some partnership members reflection was uncomfortable: it required confidence to voice views others might not share and knowing when to ask for help was not always easy.



## Signpost

Our 2025 report, **Learning practices, skills and capabilities for resident-led change**, identified eight practices for resident-led change. Some residents brought prior learning to Big Local, while others learnt over time, through getting on and doing, and through engaging in training and support. The development of these practices, skills, and capabilities was, however, uneven.

# 4. Community-based resources for resident-led change



## Key learning about the community-based resources needed for and developed through resident-led change

To achieve resident-led change, communities need certain community-based resources (alongside programme funding and support). The supply of these varies from place to place. These community-based resources can be developed through the practices of resident-led change, but may also be depleted without appropriate programme support. These resources are: community capabilities; active residents; community decision-making; community identity; community leadership; community collaboration; community spaces; legitimacy, trust, and emotional strength.

Learning and enacting the practices of resident-led change discussed in the previous chapter drew on various resources in the communities themselves. These community-based resources were essential for making the most of the funding and support provided through Big Local. This section identifies key resources which partnerships needed for, and built through, their engagement in resident-led change processes. The availability of these resources to communities varied at the start of the programme, reflecting the different starting points of each area. Similarly, the extent to which they were strengthened through the programme also differed across areas. Developing these resources through Big Local was an important programme outcome.

## 4.1. Community capabilities

As chapter 3 showed, the practices of resident-led change required and helped build a diverse mix of skills and capabilities. Because Big Local areas were selected partly because of limited previous investment and high levels of deprivation, many partnerships began the programme with relatively low levels of skills and confidence in resident-led change. As a result, these had to be built and strengthened as the programme unfolded.

Residents talked about never having done *'anything like this before'* – from attending meetings through to working together to make complex decisions about priorities and how to use the money. They described how getting involved and delivering activities led to the development of new skills and capabilities. Indeed, some residents were able to gain employment both with and beyond Big Local, as a result.

These skills and capabilities were developed in different ways through the programme. Practice-based learning – or learning by doing – was particularly important. Volunteers and workers described building skills and confidence by trying things out, reflecting on what did and didn't work, and adjusting their approach. Peer-learning was significant, whether learning from other residents in a Big Local partnership or from partnership members in other Big Local areas. Professional learning opportunities were also important,

such as support from Local Trust and training with local and national providers. There were, however, variations between and within areas in terms of how skills and capabilities were built, and how they varied over time in response to changing individual, area, programme, and national level contexts.

## 4.2. Active, engaged residents

Achieving resident-led change requires the active engagement of residents: people volunteering as partnership members, joining working groups, taking part in consultation processes, and attending community events and activities. Partnerships in areas participating in Our Bigger Story (OBS) often started the programme with low levels of community engagement. However, the Big Local programme model – combining money with support, and the requirements to establish partnerships, consult on needs, and develop action plans – contributed to increasingly engaged and active communities.

In most areas in OBS, a pool of active and connected residents was developed. Those who volunteered in the partnerships brought motivation, passion, energy, time, knowledge, and a wide range of skills. Their motivations for getting, and staying, involved varied. However, motivations were often social (e.g. making new friends and developing networks) or emotional and values-based (e.g. being passionate about where they lived, wanting to make a difference, having a sense of duty, or wanting to feel valued). These motivations provided drive and energy, but involvement could also wear volunteers down, particularly when they didn't feel valued for what they were doing (see section 4.8).

In turn, partnerships encouraged wider engagement by creating various ways to get involved. These included:

- Highlighting the important social aspects of meetings that are not just task focused ('Big Local should also be fun').
- Working through sub-groups which attracted residents to an issue they felt passionate about.
- Ensuring opportunities for wider circles of volunteers around the partnership.
- Running small grants programmes to engage with different community groups and activists with enterprising ideas.
- Providing training for residents in youth work.

As a result, Big Local helped activate residents, mobilising significant numbers of volunteers by encouraging those who had never engaged with existing structures and helping them feel more confident about being involved.

Overall, Big Local both needed and built actively engaged communities. There were, however, variations in engagement – both in levels at the start of the programme and in how engagement developed over time. Local histories of activism, investment in community development, and the presence of pre-existing community infrastructure were significant factors. Community infrastructure includes facilities, services, and spaces that support everyday life and wellbeing in a community, like schools, health centres, community buildings, transport, and green spaces. Areas with previous investment tended to have higher levels of initial engagement, making it easier to mobilise residents. In other areas, building engagement proved particularly challenging. Partnership members often worried if they had reached enough people, and not just the loudest voices.

## 4.3. Community decision-making

In all Big Local areas, residents had to make shared decisions about which needs to prioritise, what their vision for the future should be, and which activities would help it. As discussed previously, building appropriate governance structures was an important practice of resident-led change. Here, we discuss how establishing these governance structures supported effective, resident-led decision-making, while recognising that there were challenges along the way.

In many areas partnerships chose to only include residents, reflecting concerns that involving others – such as councillors or professionals – might undermine residents and dominate decision-making. In a few areas decision-making was controlled by a few residents in the partnership, or sometimes by Big Local workers. Shared decision making could be interrupted by conflict or turnover of partnership members.

Establishing shared decision-making was, for many, a steep learning curve, particularly in areas where partnership members had not previously been involved in such structures. Members often felt the weight of responsibility, especially when making difficult decisions that would affect their community, including family, friends, and neighbours (see section 4.8). The availability of support and long-term nature of the programme were important in developing skills and resolving difficulties.

In some areas, Big Local funding was used for training at the start of programme to support their shared decision-making. Other partnerships drew heavily on support from Big Local reps, the Locally Trusted Organisation (LTO), and/or a Big Local worker. Generally, workers understood the resident-led ethos of the programme and were keen to support decision-making without undermining residents. However, in some areas, Big Local workers inadvertently overpowered resident decision making, or residents became overly dependent on them.

“ *[Our worker] had some very good ideas, but... tended to come along and say, 'This is what you are doing'. It's our fault for not telling them, you know, 'We will make the decisions and we will tell you what we want done,' but I think that's a bit of learning, you know, we now have a better idea of what our role is and what we want staff to do for us. (partnership member)*

In one area taking part in OBS, the challenges of establishing shared decision making proved too great, and towards the end of the programme the partnership was dissolved and the area move away from the Big Local model. Even so, the voluntary organisation that took responsibility for distributing the remaining funds continued to do so in line with the area's Big Local plan priorities.

## 4.4. Community identity

Having some level of community identity helps motivate residents to work together to create change. In some areas, there was a clear sense of community identity at the start of the Big Local journey, while in others this developed over time. In some cases, Big Local areas aligned neatly with existing boundaries – neighbourhoods or villages with a pre-existing sense of community identity. Others were newly defined areas – a sub-set of a wider community, or a combination of two or three neighbourhoods or villages. A sense of identity and belonging tended to be strongest where Big Local boundaries matched residents' own understanding of what constituted their neighbourhood, village, or town.

In some cases, building a community identity was an explicit goal in Big Local plans. Bringing people together and ensuring benefit for residents across the whole Big Local area was central to how partnerships approached the programme. To achieve this, they organised events (such as galas, carnivals, and markets), which alongside flagship projects (such as parks and community hubs), helped build a sense of belonging.

Partnerships in those areas with a less distinct community identity had to work harder to create and deliver a shared vision and to mobilise people to support it. Some of these partnerships had to carefully negotiate how Big local funds were used: they had to be seen to be equitable across different communities or estates. In those areas where partnerships struggled to achieve the Big Local outcomes tended to have a noticeably weaker sense of community identity. While those that made greater progress generally demonstrated a stronger community identity.

## 4.5. Community leadership

Community leadership was both an important ingredient in, and an outcome of, resident-led change through Big Local. It involved not only individual leaders (such as partnership members and chairs of working groups) and their skills, capabilities, and mindsets, but also the wider leadership processes, including shared decision making, planning, and delivery.

Big Local partnerships were concerned with developing and sustaining community leadership and recognised that this often needed to start with encouraging engagement in community activities. When asked what helped build community leadership, partnership members talked about:

- Appealing to the interests of people, for example what they care about and want to get involved in.
- Finding fun ways of bringing people together.
- Cultivating a culture of patience and persistence to stick with planned actions over a long time.
- Providing opportunities to reflect on progress and decisions.
- Supporting people to manage criticism.

In some areas, Big Local funding was invested in training – and in some cases employment – opportunities for young people, so they could become future community leaders and pass knowledge on to others.

The challenges of building community leadership centred on the limited number of residents who had the time to commit to Big Local. Community leadership demanded balancing the management of day-to-day delivery and holding onto more visionary ambitions in the community's long-term plan, and the potential for very passionate and committed individuals to disagree and fall out. A Big Local worker reflected that there were some amazing people involved but they all wanted to play a leading role which sometimes created conflict. Building distributed community leadership (a collaborative, non-hierarchical approach where leadership responsibilities are shared among multiple people) was particularly challenging in communities with little history of activism before Big Local. In some areas leadership became concentrated among a small number of individuals, which limited the broader success of the Big Local partnership.

It was not the case that a distributed community leadership model led to successful outcomes. However, those areas with a distributed leadership model had a clearer sense of direction, devolved decision-making, and shared power among individuals. The model ensured that there was a sense that people were working together for the good of the community and creating a sense of ownership among residents.

“ *...what we're interested in is not that one leader, it's the collective leadership across the community. (partnership member)*

“ *It is about getting the communities to be the leaders, not the followers. (partnership member)*



## Signpost

Our 2018 report, [Big Local: Reflections on community leadership](#), explored community leadership in Big Local areas in terms of tasks and skills. It identified several aspects that can help build community leadership, such as prioritising outreach work to engage ‘quieter voices’ and providing progression routes to leadership development. The report also explores challenges around leadership, such as reaching diverse communities and being able to access power.

## 4.6. Community collaboration

Big Local partnerships were encouraged to seek support and buy-in from public and voluntary sector organisations, but this often proved difficult. Few partnerships participating in OBS began the programme with strong relationships with such agencies, and there was little evidence at the start of the programme of collaboration between residents in these areas and public and voluntary sector organisations. Big Local partnerships often had to establish themselves in a crowded landscape of organisations trying to create change, and they were sometimes seen as competitors or threats to long-established local structures. In some areas, the COVID-19 pandemic was a major turning point in developing relationships between Big Local partnerships and others in the community, voluntary, public, and private sectors. Many partnerships proved themselves to be fast and relevant to work with or lead community responses.

Having access to, and control over, funding through Big Local was seen as instrumental in establishing relationships with others. The money created a sense of legitimacy, credibility, and power to make things happen. This provided opportunities to work with external stakeholders that were not previously available. The long programme timeframe was also important, as it was only over time that councils and other organisations began to recognise that there could be a strategic fit between their agendas and Big Local plans.



*It’s about everyone pushing together for the good of the area and not competing... we have to think strategically. (project worker)*

Some Big Local partnerships invested a lot of time in reflecting on how to improve working relationships and collaborate more effectively as the programme progressed. The partnerships participating in OBS realised that constant criticism of the council was unproductive and that a different approach was needed. In one area, the question ‘can we do it together?’ was described as a turning point in the history of resident-council relationships. The development of such relationships – particularly with local authorities – was a significant and lasting outcome of the programme in several areas in OBS.

However, the extent and quality of these relationships differed. By the end of the programme, some Big Local partnerships felt they were still far from being treated as genuine partners in creating change. The reasons for this varied. Sometimes relationships focussed on day-to-day delivery, relying on the quality and continuity of personal relationships, rather than being part of the wider strategic way of working. Some external partners preferred working with people they saw as professional – those who understood the ways of working together. Some local authorities also struggled to relate their strategic focus to the hyper-local focus of Big Local partnerships.



*[A Big Local area could seem like] a small cog within the ward, which in turn is a small cog within the constituency and a very small cog within the city as a whole. (partnership member).*

The nature and quality of relationships that Big Local partnerships had with other bodies, including local authorities and larger voluntary sector organisations, were significant. Big Local partnerships that appeared most successful in achieving the four Big Local outcomes tended to have strong relationships with external bodies.



### Signpost

**Big Local: Reflections from the ‘outside in’** (2019), considered the views of key external stakeholders connected to partnerships participating in OBS, such as local government and voluntary sector representatives. The report highlighted mixed views among stakeholders on the progress in areas in OBS. The analysis highlighted positive stories about new or rebuilt relationships between councils and communities, as well as challenges around the small spatial size of Big Local areas versus the larger geographies of other decision-making bodies.

## 4.7. Access to community spaces

All partnerships needed access to basic facilities to support them in delivering resident-led change through Big Local. These included venues for meetings, activities, and events – such as community centres, libraries, churches, and outdoor spaces (such as parks). The existence of, and access to, such spaces varied across areas in OBS both at the start and end of the programme, affecting partnerships’ abilities to achieve wider programme outcomes.

Community spaces featured in many Big Local plans and many partnerships prioritised new community hubs, which in some cases was an all-consuming task. Many Big Local partnerships also sought to increase access to and use of outdoor spaces, such as parks.

For some partnerships, developing community spaces was always part of their plans. In other cases, it became a priority after the decline in public spending after 2010, which saw decreasing availability of public spaces for meetings and local services. In this context, Big Local partnerships drew on their resources to fill gaps created by reduced state funding.

It was, however, not only a question of the existence of such spaces, but also of whether residents had access to and control over them. This was particularly highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, when councils and other organisations closed buildings with little or no reference to residents who wished to use the spaces to deliver local activities in response to the pandemic. Residents wanted more say in how community spaces were run, the purpose they served, whose needs they meet and how, and if they were kept open. Without access to community spaces, it was harder for residents to meet, develop shared decision-making, organise events, and ultimately achieve the wider programme outcomes.

## 4.8. Legitimacy, trust, and emotional capacity

There was a set of less tangible, or measurable, resources that were both needed and built through effective resident-led change: legitimacy, trust, and emotional capacity.

### Legitimacy

Residents spoke about the challenges they previously experienced in being taken seriously by decision-makers. Having control of money and an organised structure through Big Local was significant in changing this dynamic – helping build relationships and influence change.

There were two aspects to this establishment of legitimacy. Individuals built a sense of being part of resident-led change: they felt more confident and empowered to take action. At the same time, other stakeholders started to see partnerships as key local collaborators. Partnerships developed legitimacy in their communities and with local authorities and voluntary and community organisations.

“ *Money gave us the confidence and opened the doors for us. We had kudos, could go and knock-on doors and say we are serious, we are in it for 10 years.*  
(resident)

In some Big Local areas this legitimacy was questioned at first, when other community-based organisations felt they should have been chosen to lead Big Local in their area. However, in most cases these tensions diminished over time as partnerships demonstrated action and achieved visible change.

### Trust

At the start of the programme, there were low levels of trust between residents and formal organisations and institutions in many Big Local areas. Residents were frustrated about organisations previously making promises and not delivering on them. This lack of trust made it difficult to get started, but it was also a motivator for some people to get involved in Big Local partnerships. Some said they wanted to keep an eye on how the money was spent. While others felt they could do a better job than external agencies, which they saw as having failed to solve local problems.

Trust changed over the course of the programme. It was built – and at times broke down – between the partnerships and Local Trust, among partnership members, between partnerships and LTOs, and between partnerships and their communities. Early projects, such as the creation of a play park or running a community grants scheme, were partly designed to counter initial scepticism about the programme.

“ *When we started there was a lot of apathy but that has changed because things have started happening.* (partnership member)

Recognising trust as fragile, partnership members were determined they would not let people down.

### Emotional capacity

Getting involved in Big Local was often an emotional commitment – and sometimes drain – particularly for partnership members. Resident-led change required emotional capacity. Having a commitment to, or a passion for, their place was a prime motivator for getting involved in Big Local, and feeling valued helped to keep people engaged. Partnership members carried a significant sense of responsibility: holding onto

a shared vision, prioritising community needs, and using funding wisely. Feeling accountable to fellow residents could take its toll, and at times was overwhelming.

Partnership members were also trying to fit Big Local around their day jobs, caring responsibilities, and other commitments. Many described it as a roller-coaster experience. For some, it was important to be able to vary their involvement based on energy and other commitments – like being able to ‘dip out and recover’. LTOs, Big Local reps, and workers all played important roles in building emotional capacity and providing support, especially when partnerships were experiencing conflict. However, some residents felt that this support didn’t come soon enough.

Even so, partnerships in OBS reported that they were able to strengthen their emotional capacity with the available support and by developing practices of resident led change. Residents described building skills and confidence in navigating conflict, and learning greater patience, diplomacy, and respect. This was essential for sustaining active participation over the long duration of the programme.

# 5. The difference Big Local made



## Key learning about Big Local outcomes of resident-led change

With the right funding and support, residents can develop the practices of resident-led change and build the resources they need locally to do so. These are important (interim) outcomes. They can also lead to wider changes (longer-term outcomes) in communities. In Big Local, these wider changes included outcomes initially specified by the funder: communities built skills and confidence to identify and respond to local needs; they made a difference to needs they prioritised; and became even better places to live. Having a long timeframe is crucial to securing such outcomes: resident-led change is not a quick process.

Achievement of longer-term outcomes varied between areas, as they were affected by local conditions and resources (historically, and throughout the programme), and the practices that they developed. They were also affected by wider national and local contexts. Together this meant that different areas progressed towards outcomes at different rates, and for each area the journey towards change was not smooth or linear.

Developing the practices for resident-led change drew on, and helped build, community-level resources, enabled through long-term funding and support. In this way, Big Local helped to create more resourceful communities. These practices, skills, capabilities, and other community resources developed through Big Local can be seen as important interim outcomes. In this section, however, we consider how these developments helped achieve the four overarching outcomes set by the Big Local programme, which guided the work of all partnerships. All the partnerships participating in Our Bigger Story (OBS) made progress towards these longer-term outcomes, although the extent to which they were achieved varied.

## 5.1. Communities are better able to identify local needs and take action in response to them

Assessing local needs was a requirement for all partnerships at the start of the programme (section 3.1), this was not always straightforward. Some partnerships questioned whether what they were learning through community consultations represented actual needs or just what people perceived the needs to be – highlighting the distinction between *wants* and *needs* (noted in chapter 3). This led to concerns about whether partnerships were able to identify and address more hidden or underlying problems in their communities.

As partnerships developed the practices of resident-led change, over time, most became more skilled at assessing needs – whether through trial and error or by accessing support. When partnerships felt they got better at assessing needs, it boosted their confidence. Some partnership members went on to embed continuous needs assessment into their ways of working, refining their approaches as they learned more about their communities.

**“** *Towards the end we started to ask more questions of people. We asked questions about policies, sustainability etc. – we would not have done that before – we learnt to do this. (partnership member)*

This outcome was not just about identifying needs. It was also about being able to take action in response to them. Acting on identified needs required partnerships to focus on both day-to-day delivery and broader strategic planning, often by working with others. Some partnership members described how they developed a clearer understanding of how to address needs in their communities. Others said they were able to be more responsive to needs as they arose, drawing on the skills, relationships, and confidence they built through Big Local.

**“** *It's the local level leadership, delivery, that's the key to this being such a success, they understand what's going on out there, they know what people are looking for. (councillor)*

## **5.2. People in Big Local areas will have increased skills and confidence, so that they can continue to identify and respond to needs in the future**

As suggested in section 4.1, skills and capabilities – including confidence – were developed through Big Local in all the areas in OBS, and many partnership members believed these gains would last beyond the life of the programme. There were many stories of personal development, from people describing how they developed specific skills or become more confident, to those who transformed their lives by taking on leadership roles in a supportive environment. Residents spoke about learning new skills and feeling their confidence grow, and such examples were evident across age groups and among people from various walks of life.

**“** *We're a lot more knowledgeable now about how to do things. ... We know a lot more about the community and how to do things. ... The whole thing is a learning curve. (partnership member)*

Progress toward this outcome can be seen in the many residents who had never been involved with anything like Big Local before and learned new things through doing so. These capabilities were taken forward into other decision-making structures. This included residents taking up roles in Big Local legacy bodies (designed to continue community decision-making beyond the programme) or in other bodies (such as becoming trustees of local charities or members of local councils).

However, the development of skills and confidence varied within and across areas, and over time. In some areas it was clear how new skills and confidence would continue to be used to identify and respond to community needs in the future, but in others this felt more tentative.

## 5.3. Big Local areas have made a difference to the needs their communities prioritised

Needs prioritised by partnerships can be grouped into five main clusters:

- The environment.
- Health and wellbeing.
- Building a sense of community.
- Supporting children and young people.
- Stimulating new activities to meet local needs.

Early plans were often ambitious – sometimes overly so – and in some cases priorities were reassessed and became more focused over time. This refinement reflected growing capability in assessing needs, more strategic decision-making, and a clearer understanding of what was achievable within the time and budget available.

All partnerships participating in OBS created and revised community plans over the years, and there was evidence that they made a positive contribution towards at least some of their priorities. For example, environmental improvements were made through enhanced green spaces, the creation of play parks, community gardening, and heritage walks and displays. Partnerships supported health and wellbeing activities including coffee mornings, Men in Sheds projects, fitness classes, older people's clubs, and social groups for people with experience of substance misuse, mental health issues, and social isolation.

Carnivals and fun days were used to build a sense of community and to engage residents in Big Local democracy. Partnerships were also successful in stimulating new activity and securing more local provision to meet needs such as unemployment and food poverty. For example, supporting job clubs, starting up local foodbanks, and facilitating English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) groups. A few areas ran youth work projects, holiday clubs, and other children's and young people's activities. By 2016, one Big Local partnership had already supported at least 950 children and young people. The development of community hubs gave community activity a home – a key priority for many partnerships at the start of Big Local. In such ways, all Big Local partnerships made some difference to the needs that they prioritised and re-prioritised.

The long programme timeframe was important, giving partnerships the space to assess and understand local needs, to prioritise and plan their activities in response, and to make a difference to various needs. Some of the capital development projects (such as community hubs and community energy schemes) took a long time to achieve and, at times, became a distraction from the day-to-day practices of resident-led change. Partnership members often found themselves struggling with planning bureaucracy, fundraising for additional financing, or working with other organisations. Yet, for the most part, these large-scale projects were eventually realised, even if it was not until the final year of the partnership's Big Local plan.

The longer-term nature of the programme was also important in enabling partnerships to act as an ongoing presence able to influence others to make a difference in key areas. Even in the partnerships where achieving resident-led change proved most challenging, by the end of the programme they had at least begun to make progress on the needs which they had prioritised.



## Signpost

**Building Big Local Futures: Towards legacies for people and places** (2022), examined how residents understood their achievements and the legacies being created through Big Local. Legacy was thought about in different ways, including: physical legacies such as community and public spaces; improved local services and facilities; better lives for individuals through building confidence, skills and experience; and cultural legacies around perception of place. Some areas had well-developed legacy plans; others were less clear what would happen after the programme came to an end.

## 5.4. Big Local areas are even better places to live

Big Local partnerships contributed to making their areas even better places to live by:

- Delivering activities, events, and projects.
- Generating greater energy for and engagement in change.
- Giving residents more control over community life.

Making the area a better place to live included physical improvements, such as environmental enhancements made to green spaces, play parks, and constructing or redeveloping community buildings. It also involved enhancing local services, ranging from establishing youth activities, to strengthening employment support, business support, and health and well-being services. All partnerships participating in OBS contributed to making their areas better places to live by initiating or supporting activities, events, and community groups, providing more opportunities for residents to get involved. Sometimes these were delivered directly by Big Local partnerships; at other times they were commissioned by the partnership, or enabled by partnerships influencing other organisations, such as local councils.

Being a better place to live, however, extended beyond the successful delivery of physical improvement projects, events, and activities. Partnerships often wanted their legacy to be about more than providing facilities and services.

“ *...to be about aspirations and how people feel, about themselves and their community. (partnership member)* ”

There is evidence that this was achieved, in most areas at least. People described how Big Local had helped to:

- Reduce social isolation by bringing people together.
- Boost resident confidence and aspirations.
- Support the development of new skills and employment opportunities.
- Initiate new community groups.
- Develop community engagement.
- Contribute to a greater sense of community spirit and cohesion.
- Attract new people into the area by making it a vibrant place to live.

Big Local brought together diverse groups in areas, helping people feel better about, and take pride in, where they lived. People talked about an intangible cultural change – a new belief that things could, and would, happen in their areas. ‘Bringing back community spirit’ was a common phrase. Although not always easy, this included building a shared sense of identity in each Big Local area that was made up of separate communities.

“ *Big Local really shows the coming together of the two communities which, at the outset of the project, had little in common and no real network of communication. (partnership member)* ”

However, as we will discuss further in the next chapter these improvements were often balanced against the effects of:

- National trends of deepening deprivation.
- Continued government austerity.
- The lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some Big Local partnerships acknowledged that, rather than making a place ‘even better’, their focus shifted to preventing things from getting worse in such a challenging external environment. Examples included filling gaps in youth work and holiday schemes where local authority provision had been cut.



### Signpost

Big Local partnerships made progress towards the Big Local outcomes throughout their engagement in the programme, and this progress was charted across the different OBS reports. Our 2017 report, **Big Local: Beyond the early years**, presented early examples of progress against the four Big Local programme outcomes from the across the 15 partnerships participating in OBS. It also discussed the different approaches adopted by each area.



### Signpost

**Understanding Success in Big Local Areas** (2024) explored success, arguing that it meant different things to different people. That said, it went on to examine ‘success’ against the four Big Local outcomes. All partnerships participating in OBS had made progress against these outcomes, but there were variations. Seven conditions were found to be particularly influential: local demographic and socio-economic characteristics; levels of community activity; community leadership; relationship with external bodies; shared identity; community spaces; and individual skills and capabilities. These conditions interacted in complex ways to shape success.

# 6. The potential for long-term change



## Key learning about achieving long-term change

With the right long-term funding and support, residents proved themselves resourceful in creating change in their communities. This led to a new learned sense of optimism about what is possible. It could also develop agency to make decisions and to act to create positive change, and this agency could be embedded through the structures of community-led infrastructure. This can be seen as the impact of resident-led change, but it is not inevitable: it did not happen equally across all areas in Our Bigger Story (OBS).

For resident-led change to be lasting, it must be embedded in sustainable structures and practices. It needs to be secured by developing community-led infrastructure, which includes holding a strong community vision, focusing on community change rather than activities alone. The vision should be linked to wider strategic priorities and relationships; consider sustainability of community action; and be visible and endorsed by the local community.

As the Big Local programme unfolded, Local Trust developed a hypothesis about the desired longer-term change the programme would create. This centred on developing agency. Agency was understood as residents feeling like they can affect change and have the skills and confidence to do so. The hypothesis was:



*“Long-term funding and support to build capacity gives residents in hyper-local areas agency to take decisions and to act to create positive and lasting change.” (Local Trust, n.d)*

Typically, the partnerships making the greatest progress against the four Big Local outcomes discussed in chapter 6 were also those able to demonstrate greater levels of agency, which – at least partially – supports the hypothesis.

A greater sense of agency was evident at both individual and shared levels. There were examples of:

- Partnership members moving into political leadership roles, such as local councils.
- Individuals building their personal skills and self-confidence through services and opportunities funded through Big Local.
- Residents developing complex skills and experience related to determining and meeting local needs.

At the shared level, agency was evident when residents: came together to debate different ideas and reach shared conclusions; acted proactively and felt empowered to make change; and had their voices heard. There was a growing belief in areas in OBS that residents could affect change when given the right support and funding.

“ *The biggest thing that we learnt from Big Local was, residents do have the answers to their problems, and they're a lot more wise than a lot of people give them credit for... Listen to the residents, they know best, they've got the solutions to their problems. All you need to do is facilitate that. (Big Local worker)*

In several areas in OBS, new organisations were established, or the Locally Trusted Organisation (LTO) evolved through Big Local, enabling continued resident-led decision-making and shared agency.

“ *[Big Local was] a start to help us move on. (resident)*

“ *So, obviously we [this community] lose that element of core funding, ..., but it is in all of our interests to continue to be resident-led and to continue to develop that resident-led infrastructure. So, we will, ... find the resources, the funding, the money, the income, to make those things happen. (Big Local worker)*

Early successes with generating income in legacy organisations suggest that the optimism might be well-founded.

There were, however, debates in areas in OBS about challenges in building agency at a local level. These included tensions between residents, partnerships, and other local bodies such as community interest companies. By their nature, these tensions could restrict decision making to a small, privileged group. Agency also needs to be understood in the context of structural issues – such as poverty, lack of opportunity, and lack of community cohesion – which are difficult to overcome through community action alone. In some cases, Big Local partnerships were simply unable to influence large, powerful public and/or private sector developments, even when they had the time and capacity to build relationships.

OBS used the term ‘community-led infrastructure’ to describe the practices, structures, and agency that interact to help create lasting change. Community-led infrastructure operates at the hyper-local, place-based community level. It is about lasting systems and structures, as opposed to traditional short-term community interventions. Crucially, it is about changing power relationships so that priorities, decision-making, budgets, and timescales sit in the hands of residents or community members. Areas that built the clearest community led-infrastructure had the greatest chance of sustaining the resident-led change started through Big Local, and of delivering long-term change.



## Signpost

### **Big Local Futures: Building systems of community connection and control**

(2022) examined whether and how community power was built through Big Local. It drew three conclusions. First, more powerful communities arose through Big Local through a combination of: the development of agency; community organisation; effective relationships; and the investment of money and time. Second, that community-led change could be facilitated by effective community-led infrastructure, but this was evident in only a few areas. Third, when community-led infrastructure was established, this enabled ongoing investment in community initiatives.

# 7. How wider contexts affected change



## Key learning about how context matters

Context matters to the potential of programmes such as Big Local. The national political, policy, social, and economic context, and how this evolves over the period of a long-term initiative, has implications for all involved, but plays out differently in different areas. At the same time, individual local level contexts shape how each community engages with the programme, the journey it goes on, and the potential for achieving outcomes.

Each chapter has highlighted how Big Local worked differently in each community, leading to different outcomes and impact. This demonstrates that the programme was shaped, at least in part, by the varied contexts in which it operated. Following the 15 partnerships in Our Bigger Story (OBS) for 10 years highlighted the importance of context in shaping how the programme unfolded and the extent of its impact. This chapter considers how wider factors (national and local) affected these 15 areas, shaping what was and was not achieved. These national and local factors interacted in complex ways to affect the potential of the programme, and the experience of and outcomes for individual areas.

## 7.1. A challenging national context

### *National policy environment which supported resident-led change*

Throughout the duration of the programme – which included several changes of government – there was a broadly supportive policy environment for community and neighbourhood agendas. This facilitated the innovative approaches to resident-led change associated with Big Local.

The beginning of the programme coincided with the passage of the Localism Act 2011, created by the Conservative-led coalition government of 2010 to 2015. The Act included new powers for communities and individuals and a stated commitment to devolving power to neighbourhoods.<sup>3</sup> Alongside this, the then government's Big Society vision – empowering communities and individuals to devolve power away from the state – set the policy and design context for Big Local. As the programme drew to an end, the Labour government showed a similar commitment to community-level agendas. Recent policy design – such as Pride in Place – arguably reflected and was influenced by learning from Big Local.

### *Ongoing effects of austerity and cost of living crisis*

The wider policy environment, however, was less supportive. The start of Big Local coincided with significant government spending reductions following the 2008 global financial crisis, and the beginning of a long-term policy of austerity. Among other things, this led to cuts to local government funding and services, which shaped Big Local areas and partnership plans.

<sup>3</sup> Localism Act 2011, c. 20. (UK).

In recent years, the cost of living crisis and rising costs meant more people were facing financial difficulty, creating higher levels of need while also making activities and services more expensive to deliver. Although all Big Local areas were affected by austerity – through losses to local services and growing levels of need – it played out differently across areas. This variation was influenced in part by views and decisions on whether Big Local funding should be used to fill gaps created by cuts in government funding.

### **COVID-19 pandemic related disruption**

The COVID-19 pandemic (2020 to 2021) had a major impact, and caused significant disruption, in all Big Local areas. In some cases, it brought communities together, prompting more resident-led activity and community support in response to newly identified needs. However, it also worsened needs and inequalities and hampered some Big local partnerships in operating effectively. The consequences were therefore uneven across the areas in OBS, reflecting differing local contexts, capacities, and vulnerabilities.



#### **Signpost**

During the pandemic, the OBS research pivoted to focus on how communities were responding to and affected by COVID-19. The research expanded to include other Big Local areas beyond the 15 involved in OBS, and a separate set of reports was produced. The OBS series **Building on Local: Learning about Big Local in 2020 (2021)** considered how areas had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic: they had to suspend many projects and services, start up new ones in response to urgent needs, and move some activities online. Many areas built stronger local relationships as a result and identified new priorities moving forward. The pandemic also uncovered deep levels of need and pushed residents to their limits.

## **7.2. Varied local contexts**

The unique contexts of each OBS area were reflected in the different starting points when joining the programme and contributed to different journeys of change. Differences in context further contributed to diverse outcomes across areas. Unlike the practices of, and resources required for – and built through – resident-led change (discussed in chapters 3 and 4), the contexts and characteristics of place affected areas, but residents had very little control over them.

### **Socio-economic characteristics**

Areas involved in OBS included a mix of urban, rural, and coastal areas, with populations ranging from just under 2,500 to just over 11,500 (see appendix 2). They varied in levels of disadvantage, demographics, housing mix, community activity, and social infrastructure. Later analysis revealed two of the 15 areas were classed as ‘left behind’, defined by OCSI (Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion, who advised Local Trust on area characteristics) as ‘places which face the double disadvantage of high deprivation and a lack of social infrastructure’.<sup>4</sup>

The OBS research found that while the starting positions of different areas played a role, they did not entirely determine how things played out. These characteristics were varied over time. Wider developments

<sup>4</sup> OCSI (2019). *Left behind? Understanding communities on the edge*. Local Trust <https://www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk/resources/left-behind-understanding-communities-on-the-edge>

(such as patterns of migration, labour market changes, and housing development initiatives) created change in each area, and while those developments were beyond the control of the Big Local programme, they impacted how it unfolded.

### ***Local government dynamics***

Some areas experienced local government restructuring during the programme, with new statutory bodies and local authorities being established or boundaries changing. This disrupted some existing relationships with councillors and officers, and – particularly in areas where combined authorities were introduced – created another tier of government for Big Local partnerships to engage. Similarly, changes in political administrations and turnover among local staff meant relationships built over time and previously agreed plans often had to be renegotiated. In some cases, this led to positive developments, while in others it created setbacks or increased uncertainty for partnerships.

### ***Partnership dynamics***

Partnership-level dynamics were also an important part of the local context. In some areas, partnerships had turnover in resident membership due to natural cycles of involvement and personal reasons (such as burnout or ill health). Sadly, some partnership members passed away during the 10 years of the programme. These contextual issues were beyond the control of areas. Turnover among workers, Big Local reps, and Locally Trusted Organisations (LTOs) also affected areas differently – with some experiencing greater continuity than others. Continuity and turnover brought both challenges and benefits, impacting availability, energy, and enthusiasm, which had wider implications for how the programme progressed.

# 8. Conclusion: Real, but fragile, change

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Big Local differed from previous regeneration and community development programmes by emphasising resident control, the lack of prescription, provision of multi-faceted support, and its long-term nature. Funding and support helped build capacity, capability, and legitimacy. Decisions were taken by residents, and positive change was created. Amazing things were achieved, including high-profile developments such as community hubs, significant environmental regeneration, and community-led energy initiatives. For some, this contributed to the realisation of agency – the power to get things done – which became embedded in enduring structures and processes of community-led infrastructure. Together, this illustrates the potential of a programme like Big Local.

More commonly, residents' lives were made better through day-to-day activities and the practices and processes involved in 'doing' resident-led change. Collectively these made their communities even better places to live. These outcomes might appear more modest and less visibly evident, but they are still significant. Residents in partnerships participating in OBS said that their areas felt different:

- Relationships between residents in their communities became stronger, as had relationships between communities and external agencies.
- They felt more capable and confident.
- There was a stronger sense of identity and place.
- They felt better about the places where they live.

We have argued that learning new skills and capabilities through engaging in the practices of resident-led change and experiencing the differences that were made, generated a 'learned optimism' – a belief that residents could make a difference. This, we suggest, can be seen as a significant impact of the programme. Achieving it took long-term investment of money, support, and a lot of dedicated time, passion, and commitment from residents and community workers. It has been an eventful journey with highs and lows, and lots of learning on the way.

As the Big Local programme came to an end, significant change had happened, yet the forward journey for the areas remained uncertain. The external context was challenging, and it was unclear how sustainable change would be without continued funding and assistance. Maintaining credible resident-led structures and effective community governance requires ongoing work, which is likely to be difficult without external support.

Despite these ongoing challenges, Big Local gave residents a renewed sense of optimism and pride – in their own resourcefulness and in what they can accomplish when provided with the right funding and support. This confidence in their shared ability represents an important legacy of the programme.

# Appendix 1: Our Bigger Story report and film summaries



More films are available through the Our Bigger Story website: [www.ourbiggerstory.com](http://www.ourbiggerstory.com)

Report details	Summary	Links
<p><b>Our Bigger Story: The First Chapter</b></p> <p>Angus McCabe, Mandy Wilson, Rob Macmillan with Paul Morgans and Matt Edwards</p> <p>2016</p>	<p>Identified common themes emerging across the 15 partnerships participating in OBS, including areas of focus, achievements, challenges, and long-term goals. It described the early phases of Big Local partnerships, including plan drafting and reviewing, identifying residents' needs and priorities, early approaches to making communities even better places to live, and power and influence.</p> <p>It found partnerships were navigating a series of balancing acts, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Freedoms of the programme versus a desire for advice and guidance.</li> <li>● Community needs versus community wants.</li> <li>● Long-term development versus short-term delivery.</li> <li>● Replicating formal structures versus participatory approaches.</li> <li>● High passions and disagreements versus neighbourhood relationships.</li> <li>● Hyper-local versus outward looking.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Full report</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Resident Led Plans and Reviews film</a></li> </ul>
<p><b>Big Local: Beyond the Early Years</b></p> <p>Angus McCabe, Mandy Wilson, Rob Macmillan with Paul Morgans and Matt Edwards</p> <p>2017</p>	<p>Based on data from 2015 to 2016, this report identified early learning from the 15 Our Bigger Story areas. It introduced each of the 15 areas, outlined the Big Local approach, reflected on early key themes (such as leadership, influence, expectations, and legacy), analysed strengths and challenges facing the programme, and identified emerging issues for future consideration. It identified key common themes of activities, and different strategies each partnership adopted to meet their goals and achieve lasting change. Examples of progress were presented against the four Big Local programme outcomes: identifying and acting upon local needs; increasing skills and confidence for people to respond to needs in the future; making a difference to the needs prioritised; and making areas even better places to live.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Full report</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Summary report</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Working for Change: The Big Local Outcomes film</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">What Works film</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Big Local Diary Lines film</a></li> </ul>

Report details	Summary	Links
<p><b>Big Local: Reflections on 'resident led' change</b></p> <p>Angus McCabe, Mandy Wilson and Rob Macmillan</p> <p>2018</p>	<p>The concept of 'resident-led' was explored in this paper, based on material from workshops, resident diaries written for OBS, video footage, and interviews with external partners. It explored questions of resident identity, qualification, and authenticity. It also discussed levels of resident activity, and different structures for negotiating or mediating residents' views and priorities. The report proposed enablers for resident-led change, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The money itself opening doors to points of influence.</li> <li>● Credible governance structures.</li> <li>● Development of knowledge, skills, and leadership capacity.</li> <li>● Physical space to meet and organise.</li> <li>● Connections and networks inside and outside of the local area.</li> <li>● Developing a trusted 'brand'.</li> <li>● Time to reflect and change course where necessary.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Full report</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Resident led change film</a></li> </ul>
<p><b>Big Local: Reflections on Community Leadership</b></p> <p>Angus McCabe, Mandy Wilson and Rob Macmillan</p> <p>2018</p>	<p>Community leadership in Big Local areas was explored in terms of tasks and skills. The report explained that the following eight features help support community leadership:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Prioritising outreach work to promote the programme and engage 'quieter' voices.</li> <li>● Starting small and building greater participation through engaging individual residents.</li> <li>● Appealing to what people are interested in through working groups on specific subjects.</li> <li>● Learning from risk taking in trying new approaches and investing money.</li> <li>● Providing progression routes to leadership development.</li> <li>● Finding fun ways to bring people together.</li> <li>● Having patience and persistence.</li> <li>● Facilitating opportunities to reflect, and having the skills and capacity to accept or manage criticism.</li> </ul> <p>The report also explored challenges around leadership, including capacity constraints, the ability of partnerships to reach diverse communities, being able to access power, dilemmas of attribution and credit for change, and negotiating conflict.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Full report</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Community Leadership film</a></li> </ul>

Report details	Summary	Links
<p><b>Big Local: Reflections from ‘the Outside In’</b></p> <p>Angus McCabe, Mandy Wilson and Rob Macmillan</p> <p>2019</p>	<p>This paper considered the views of 70 people with external connections to the Big Local areas in OBS. This mostly involved local government officials and elected members, but also included those from elsewhere in the voluntary sector, and a few individuals from private, faith, and university sectors. Some interviewees identified real progress that had been achieved through resident leadership in Big Local areas. Some expressed frustrations around perceived poor governance, and the slow pace of decision-making and development. The research found positive stories about new or rebuilt relationships between councils and communities, but also a challenge around the small scale of Big Local areas versus the much larger geographies of local authorities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Full report</a></li> </ul>
<p><b>Big Local as Change Agent</b></p> <p>Angus McCabe, Mandy Wilson and Rob Macmillan, with Paul Morgans, Phil Ware and Creative Media</p> <p>2020</p>	<p>Big Local was described as a “catalytic ‘change agent’” in this report, which looked at the nature of change and the ways in which Big Local areas achieve it. Change is multifaceted, and can be identified as change for individuals, local groups and across communities. A range of actors, resources and approaches were mobilised through Big Local, including residents in different roles, paid workers, local reps, and Locally Trusted Organisations (LTOs). Local knowledge, commitment and passion were vital, but conflicts, local apathy or scepticism and external factors such as policy change could act as stumbling blocks, as did managing day-to-day pressures of life for individuals. The report also explored elements of the Big Local programme design, including the length of the programme, the support offer, LTOs, partnership approaches, and the hyper-local approach.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Full report</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Summary report</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Changing Communities film</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Big Local Voices: change and power film</a></li> </ul>
<p><b>Building on Local: Learning about Big Local in 2020</b></p> <p>Angus McCabe, Mandy Wilson and Rob Macmillan</p> <p>2021</p>	<p>After presenting a summary of where Big Local had got to before the COVID-19 pandemic, this report brought together learning generated from the national lockdowns and other local impacts. Partnerships participating in OBS, like everywhere, faced significant challenges during COVID-19: they had to suspend many projects and services, start up or participate in new ones in response to urgent needs such as food and advice, and move some activities online. Many areas built stronger local relationships as a result and identified new priorities moving forward. However, the pandemic also uncovered deep levels of need and pushed residents to their limits. Some partnerships, however, were able to reach more residents and involve more people. Finally, the report considered local impacts on areas in OBS, and implications for the Big Local model. It noted how Big Local funding and support enabled residents to step up and support their communities in a time of crisis.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Full report</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Summary report</a></li> </ul>

Report details	Summary	Links
<p><b>Building Big Local Futures: Building systems of community connection and control</b></p> <p>Angus McCabe, Mandy Wilson and Rob Macmillan</p> <p>2022</p>	<p>This report explored whether there was anything qualitatively different about community power built through the approaches taken by the Big Local programme. It drew three conclusions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● More powerful communities can arise from a combination of four features of Big Local activities: the development of agency; community organisation; effective relationships; and the investment of money and time.</li> <li>● Community-led change can be facilitated by effective community-led infrastructure, which has a range of functions and activities, as well as potential high-level outcomes. However, the development of this varied across Big Local areas, depending on a variety of factors.</li> <li>● The development of community-led infrastructure enabled investment in community-based initiatives in a way that was qualitatively different to programmes other than Big Local, although its potential at the time was only just being realised in some areas.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Full report</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Building Community Power film</a></li> </ul>
<p><b>Building Big Local Futures: Towards legacies for people and places</b></p> <p>Angus McCabe, Mandy Wilson and Rob Macmillan</p> <p>2022</p>	<p>The focus of this report was legacy – plans each Big Local Partnership was developing around what they would ‘leave behind’ and continue to work on after the end of Big Local. Big Local partnerships thought about legacy in different ways, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Physical legacies such as community and public spaces.</li> <li>● Shaping local services and facilities through commissioning new services, delivering their own services, supporting others to develop social enterprises, and influencing policy makers and service providers.</li> <li>● Realising lasting change for individuals through building connections, confidence, skills, and experience.</li> <li>● Cultural legacies around perception of place.</li> </ul> <p>Some areas had well-developed legacy plans and were in the process of developing organisations or groups that would take over to continue delivery after Big Local. Others felt Big Local would end at the close of the programme. They also highlighted questions around continuation of projects after funding ended, although some had been successful in securing longer term funding and greater momentum for grassroots community activity.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Full report</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Legacies film</a></li> </ul>

Report details	Summary	Links
<p><b>A delicate balance: national support provision in the Big Local programme</b></p> <p>Mandy Wilson, Angus McCabe, Angela Ellis Paine and Rob Macmillan</p> <p>2023</p>	<p>Local Trust provided and facilitated a programme of support as part of Big Local. Support had six key functions through providing: technical expertise; skills development; adding capacity; guidance and information sharing; relationship building; and peer support within and across areas. The support programme included training, information websites, and support from Locally Trusted Organisations (LTOs) and Big Local reps. Take up of support varied, affected by awareness and perceived relevance of what was on offer; different starting points of individuals; timing; resources; confidence in a national (rather than local) offer; and official restrictions and limits. When areas did access support, they reported that it increased confidence, enhanced skills and knowledge, improved group working and relationships, added direct capacity, and enhanced the potential for sustainable long-term change. There were tensions and balancing acts for Local Trust in providing support, including balancing the local with the national, mitigating risk with control, enabling flexibility and ensuring compliance, understanding supply and demand, and using both expertise and relational support.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Full report</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Summary report</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Support in the Big Local programme film</a></li> </ul>
<p><b>Understanding success in Big Local</b></p> <p>Mandy Wilson, Ellie Munro, Angela Ellis Paine, Rob Macmillan, Peter Wells and Angus McCabe</p> <p>July 2024</p>	<p>This report considered the nature of success, and success according to whom, in a non-prescriptive programme where quantitative reporting of outputs was not required. It found that 'success' is a multi-faceted and complex matter. Big Local partnerships had all made progress and achieved change in different ways, and those that had achieved the greatest progress against the four Big Local outcomes also demonstrated greater levels of agency. The report examined variations in success according to seven conditions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Local demographic and socio-economic factors.</li> <li>● Levels of community activity.</li> <li>● Community leadership.</li> <li>● Relationships.</li> <li>● Shared identity.</li> <li>● Community spaces.</li> <li>● And individuals' skills and capabilities.</li> </ul> <p>It also identified four ways of working that had an impact on the chances of success:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Appropriate and robust governance structures.</li> <li>● Taking a strategic approach.</li> <li>● Engaging with effective support.</li> <li>● Managing conflict.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Full report</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Creating even better places to live film</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Building skills and confidence film</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Making change in communities film</a></li> </ul>

Report details	Summary	Links
<p><b>Learning practices, skills and capabilities for resident-led change in Big Local Areas</b></p> <p>Mandy Wilson, Ellie Munro, Angela Ellis Paine, Rob Macmillan, Peter Wells and Angus McCabe</p> <p>2025</p>	<p>Focusing on what skills and capabilities underpin resident-led community change, this report identified eight practices and associated skills evident in the Big Local areas in OBS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Listening to the whole community and identifying needs.</li> <li>● Creating a vision and being strategic.</li> <li>● Residents working together and making shared decisions.</li> <li>● Engaging and communicating with the wider community.</li> <li>● Delivering projects, activities and events.</li> <li>● Building effective relationships and working collaboratively.</li> <li>● Managing and learning from conflict.</li> <li>● Reflecting on what has and hasn't worked, and accessing support when needed.</li> </ul> <p>It also focused on the importance of the key features of the design of the Big Local Programme. First, funding – that residents controlled the use of the money; that it was non-prescriptive; and that it was long term. Second, support – that it was consistent support, available throughout the programme based on relationships; and that it was multi-faceted to develop the practice, skills, and capabilities for resident led change. Overall, what often mattered to most partnerships was the development of a shared belief in what could be achieved and an understanding of how – this can be thought of as learned optimism.</p> <p>The report found that some residents brought prior learning to Big Local, while others learnt through doing. Peer learning and professional learning opportunities were both important. The design of Big Local meant people had time and opportunity to understand what was needed and develop skills and confidence.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Full report</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Research team film</a></li> </ul>

# Appendix 2: Our Bigger Story area summaries



Area	Characteristics*	Initial vision	Delivery themes	Approach taken	Key achievements
<a href="#">Barrowcliff</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Yorkshire &amp; Humber</li> <li>● Coastal</li> <li>● Population in 2015 = 3,563, 2022 = 3,659</li> <li>● IMD ranking 2019 = 3,847</li> </ul>	A safe, clean and attractive neighbourhood that people are proud of and where everyone has the best possible chances in life (2014 plan).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Community assets and spaces</li> <li>● Local economy</li> <li>● Investing in young people</li> <li>● Working collaboratively</li> <li>● Place-based pride and connection</li> </ul>	Voluntary activity by residents, community grants, commissioned projects, partnership working. The partnership was supported by a community worker seconded from the local authority.	Built a play area; created a sense of identity and belonging; established strong relationships with other organisations and agencies.
<a href="#">Birchfield</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● West Midlands</li> <li>● Urban</li> <li>● Population in 2015 = 7,268, 2022 = 8,890</li> <li>● IMD ranking 2019 = 2,413</li> </ul>	A neighbourhood where the diverse community feels belonging, pride, empowered, engaged and able to create a happy, safe, clean, prosperous and regenerated area with a lasting legacy in which to live and work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Working collaboratively</li> <li>● Community assets and spaces</li> <li>● Place-based pride and connection</li> <li>● Local economy</li> <li>● Health and wellbeing</li> </ul>	Paid workers coordinated activities and supported volunteering development, youth work, environmental improvements, and provided a platform for arts and creativity. Many projects delivered by social enterprises and by residents' groups.	Over 30 social enterprises emerged and a consortium formed to scale up and bid for contracts. An Environment task group of residents and agencies established to address local concerns.
<a href="#">Blackpool Revue</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● North West</li> <li>● Coastal</li> <li>● Population in 2015 = 2,907, 2022 = 3,373</li> <li>● IMD ranking 2019 = 80</li> </ul>	Aimed to create an empowered community living next to a thriving and bustling town centre in an area which looks good and feels safe and welcoming to all existing and new residents.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Community assets and spaces</li> <li>● Responding to crisis and urgent need</li> <li>● Place-based pride and connection</li> <li>● Investing in young people</li> <li>● Working collaboratively</li> <li>● Local economy</li> </ul>	Invested in a community hub where residents could access support and advice. A development worker supported residents to work with agencies to influence the area masterplan and create a more positive image and feel of the area; prioritised community safety and tackled issues around substance misuse; delivered community grants programme. Sessional youth workers supported young people's activities.	Improved relationships between residents and local agencies; engaged wide range of residents in local activities; made environmental improvements.

Area	Characteristics*	Initial vision	Delivery themes	Approach taken	Key achievements
<a href="#">Bountagu</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● London</li> <li>● Urban</li> <li>● Population in 2015 = 5,162, 2019 = 4,918</li> <li>● IMD ranking 2019 = 4,882</li> </ul>	An integrated, harmonious Bountagu community, bringing together diverse groups, offering a range of activities and opportunities, leaving a legacy of beauty, hope and aspiration for future generations (2013 plan).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Health and wellbeing</li> <li>● Investing in young people</li> <li>● Community assets and spaces</li> </ul>	Began with a community development approach led by staff. Opened a community hub. Lost access to the staff and the hub. From 2017, mostly run by volunteers from an office space with occasional staff support. In 2023 Local trust instigated an alternative approach based on grants to local organisations.	Created opportunities for residents to get together and had a particular focus on young people and the local economy.
<a href="#">Catton Grove</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● East of England</li> <li>● Urban</li> <li>● Population in 2015 = 6,102, 2022 = 6,481</li> <li>● IMD ranking 2019 = 5,726</li> </ul>	To make Catton Grove an even better place to live, work and volunteer (2014 plan).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Health and wellbeing</li> <li>● Investing in young people</li> <li>● Community assets and spaces</li> </ul>	Development worker helped instigate and coordinate small grants programme, and commissioned projects and services.	Locally based health and wellbeing activities; provided small grants to community initiatives; improved indoor and outdoor community spaces.
<a href="#">Grassland Hasmoor</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● East Midlands</li> <li>● Urban</li> <li>● Population in 2015 = 9,966, 2022 = 10,113</li> <li>● IMD ranking 2019 = 14,092</li> </ul>	Grassland Hasmoor for everyone; getting the two communities talking and working together; people doing things for themselves (2014 plan).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Community assets and spaces</li> <li>● Engaging local residents</li> <li>● Investing in young people</li> <li>● Improving health and wellbeing</li> </ul>	A lot of voluntary activity through several volunteer-led working groups and activities. The partnership also commissioned some services and operated small grants schemes. Part time support and admin workers in place.	Enhanced community action; improved green spaces; created two community hubs; established a charitable company.
<a href="#">Growing Together</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● East Midlands</li> <li>● Urban</li> <li>● Population in 2015 = 11,577, 2022 = 13,037</li> <li>● IMD ranking 2019 = 5,086</li> </ul>	Growing Together sought to make great places to live, where residents cared for each other, the community and their environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Community engagement</li> <li>● Community assets and spaces</li> <li>● Investing in young people</li> <li>● Working collaboratively</li> </ul>	Grants funding for community groups to deliver projects that reflected priorities; projects commissioned by the partnership, from trusted organisations already working in the area; direct delivery by Big Local worker and volunteers.	Supported new groups and activities; created a community hub; improved play areas and cleaned up waterways; improved nursery facilities, developed an after-school club and several weekly youth projects; developed a Neighbourhood Plan and worked with local agencies.

Area	Characteristics*	Initial vision	Delivery themes	Approach taken	Key achievements
<a href="#">Hanwell</a> <a href="#">Copley Close</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● London</li> <li>● Urban</li> <li>● Population in 2015 = 7,740, 2022 = 12,277 (including expansion of area boundary)</li> <li>● IMD ranking 2019 = 8,180</li> </ul>	Sought to make their neighbourhood a vibrant and safe place to be: a place where people feel they belong, can thrive and are inspired to create opportunities to work and play together.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Community assets and spaces</li> <li>● Health and wellbeing</li> <li>● Investing in young people</li> </ul>	Big Local workers commissioned a range of providers to run horticultural programmes, redevelop a conservation area, run health activity groups, and influence local planning and regeneration programmes.	Rejuvenated local green spaces on estates and took over an area of woodland for redevelopment. Strong presence during COVID-19 lockdowns, and this also led to a pivot towards more health and wellbeing activities based on identified needs. Play groups and successful projects for young people around local issues, wellbeing and self-esteem.
<a href="#">Lawrence Weston</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● South West</li> <li>● Urban</li> <li>● Population in 2015 = 7,183, 2022 = 7,507</li> <li>● IMD ranking 2019 = 3,422</li> </ul>	To make Lawrence Weston a friendly and vibrant neighbourhood where the word “community” really matters. A place where all residents could live happy, healthy and fulfilling lives, from childhood through to old age.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Responding to crisis and urgent need</li> <li>● Community assets and spaces</li> <li>● Working collaboratively</li> <li>● Place-based pride and connection</li> </ul>	Two paid workers focussed on community economic development and a climate-positive approach to improving local quality of life. Community energy projects, new play areas, influencing house building and renting policies, community gardening project and securing a purpose-built community centre.	Used initial Big Local investment as seed funding for securing substantial extra funding. Developed a community solar farm, community-owned wind turbine, new community centre and allotment project. Influenced local housing policy, and attracted a new supermarket to the area.
<a href="#">Northfleet North</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● South East</li> <li>● Coastal</li> <li>● Population in 2015 = 2,412, 2022 = 2,560</li> <li>● IMD ranking 2019 = 3,422</li> </ul>	Residents prioritised issues around community safety, young people’s voice and opportunities, community celebration and identity, local heritage, and the environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Community assets and spaces</li> <li>● Place-based pride and connection</li> <li>● Local economy</li> <li>● Responding to crisis and urgent need</li> <li>● Investing in young people</li> </ul>	Early focus on trying to secure a community building. Big Local workers supported local groups with free venues and start-up grants, and individuals through employment support and support for social entrepreneurship. Activities around heritage and the arts. Attempts to influence large-scale area regeneration development.	Free Space initiative allowed existing groups to access to community space and attracted new services to the area. Network built up around local arts and crafts, facilitating community identity. Outdoor spaces for health and wellbeing developed, as well as a new playground.

Area	Characteristics*	Initial vision	Delivery themes	Approach taken	Key achievements
<a href="#">Radstock and Westfield</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● South West</li> <li>● Rural</li> <li>● Population in 2015 = 11,354, 2022 = 12,702</li> <li>● IMD score 2025 = 18,120</li> </ul>	For a community that is participating in its future and working in partnership to make things happen.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Community assets and spaces</li> <li>● Place-based pride and connection</li> <li>● Local economy</li> <li>● Responding to crisis and urgent need</li> <li>● Investing in young people</li> </ul>	Initially two workers, but later one, supported the partnership to run a small grants programme through 'Dragon's Den' style events. Co-funded a purpose-built health and wellbeing centre and improved other local facilities. Attempted to develop projects for young people.	Dragon's Den events distributed £70,000 of small grants across 12 events, including projects about young people and the environment. These events were also used as opportunities for engaging the community. Big Local funding was invested in facilities alongside local health services and the local authority, including a park and running track, community centre, arts space, and wellbeing centre.
<a href="#">Ramsey</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● East of England</li> <li>● Rural</li> <li>● Population in 2015 = 8,582, 2022 = 8,593</li> <li>● IMD ranking 2019 = 15,944</li> </ul>	To create a place where young people are involved, create great transport links, work together, provide sustainable training and employment opportunities, and make the most of market town heritage.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Investing in young people</li> <li>● Local economy</li> <li>● Working collaboratively</li> <li>● Community assets and spaces</li> </ul>	Community development worker, youth workers, heritage worker, and administrative support were put in place early in the programme. They worked to build strong relationships, connections and capacity within the community and with external agencies; community grants and commissioning of services; supported community development and provided leadership training for residents.	Supported new, affordable youth activities; ran a youth work training programme; created a transport strategy; promoted the town as a tourist destination and increased footfall; built a community hub and a skate park; collaborated with local authorities.
<a href="#">Three Parishes</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● West Midlands</li> <li>● Rural;</li> <li>● Population in 2015 = 7,710, 2022 = 7,876</li> <li>● IMD ranking 2019 = 17,559</li> </ul>	To improve people's lives and make the three parishes safer and be good places to live, learn and grow. Had an ambition to achieve resilience, confidence, and sustainability.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Community assets and spaces</li> <li>● Local economy</li> <li>● Responding to crisis and urgent need</li> <li>● Community engagement</li> </ul>	The partnership saw themselves as enablers. With the help of a development worker and administrative support, they commissioned services, allocated grants to local organisations, and relied on existing volunteer networks in the community. The partnership used this approach to fill gaps identified in the community.	The partnership felt that Big Local played a role in helping the three villages be seen as more desirable places to live. They supported improvements to existing community spaces; created a network to support small businesses; and commissioned a money and debt advice service.

Area	Characteristics*	Initial vision	Delivery themes	Approach taken	Key achievements
<a href="#">Westfield</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Yorkshire &amp; Humber</li> <li>● Urban</li> <li>● Population in 2015 = 3,599, 2022 = 3,374</li> <li>● IMD ranking 2019 = 8,211</li> </ul>	To develop the Westfield community to its full potential (2015 plan).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Place-based pride and connection</li> <li>● Community assets and spaces</li> <li>● Responding to crisis and urgent need</li> <li>● Investing in young people</li> </ul>	The partnership developed a community hub and created a centre manager role. Youth work services were commissioned and some activities and events were resident-led. Big local worked in partnership with agencies to improve the environment and play facilities.	Organised events and increased community engagement; developed a community hub which provided local access to services; hosted a foodbank and acted as a vaccination centre during the COVID-19 pandemic; ensured regular children's activities; supported a new play park.
<a href="#">Whitley Bay</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● North East</li> <li>● Coastal</li> <li>● Population in 2015 = 2,994, 2022 = 2,861</li> <li>● IMD ranking 2019 = 9,027</li> </ul>	To create a strong, happy, creative community and surroundings that look cared for, so residents and visitors can access the support we need to thrive (2013 plan).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Community engagement</li> <li>● Place-based pride and connection</li> <li>● Community assets and spaces</li> <li>● Working collaboratively</li> </ul>	The partnership commissioned a town plan; ran a small grants scheme to fund residents' ideas; delivered a range of social activities; fundraised for and created a community centre. Residents were supported by workers with varying roles over time e.g. chief executive, community involvement worker and neighbourhood caretaker.	Provided daily activities to reduce resident loneliness and social isolation; influenced the regeneration of the seafront and improved the local environment; resurrected the Whitley Bay carnival; created a community hub and café.

**\*Sources:**

School for Public Health Research (SPHR) provided population data in 2015.

Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2021a) 'All people (Census 2021)'. Available at: [ons.gov.uk](https://ons.gov.uk) (Accessed 1st October, 2025).

Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) 2019 'English indices of deprivation 2019'. Available at: [gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019](https://gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019) (Accessed 1st October, 2025).