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SHARED ASSETS

A photograph of two women walking through a long, arched tunnel made of metal hoops and covered in climbing plants, likely a vine tunnel. The scene is bathed in a warm, golden light, creating a sense of depth and perspective. The women are walking away from the camera towards the end of the tunnel.

# Activate!

## Land in the hands of communities

Hannah Gardiner

[www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk](http://www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk)

# Local Trust

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# Foreword

By Michael O'Neill, Ridge Hill Big Local

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I have been involved with Ridge Hill Big Local since 2013. Initially there was a lot of 'ebb and flow' with regards to peoples' involvement, but eventually a small group of residents remained who to this day are still active in all that we do and all that we aim for.

We will not be able to 'fix' all of the issues in our area, but we are in a privileged position through our funding from Big Local, to identify and try to tackle some of these issues that we and our fellow residents are aware of. That's why we set up a social enterprise company with a view to it becoming our 'legacy vehicle' beyond the Big Local funding project.

As local people, we are aware of how loved and valued our community asset is. Many of our older residents tell us about how popular and well used the two lakes were in the past. They were a source of local pride, but the wider community too used to come here to go on the boats and visit the park.

Over the recent years the lakes were leased by a private, for-profit organisation but eventually it ceased trading. This presented us with an opportunity to approach the council to propose ourselves taking over the running and day-to-day operation of the lakes, and we were successful in securing a 25-year lease.

We want the same as our partners – the council, local social landlord, the police, local councillors. We have realised that collaboration and working innovatively are key to achieving our goals and over time mutual respect and appreciation has developed. This has helped to build trust and confidence in each other, and as this has grown, so too has our ambition and awareness of what we can potentially achieve. Working together, we have achieved so much more than working in isolation.

We are often frustrated by the low numbers of residents getting involved but we are always investigating how we can get more people to engage with us or join our group. We want to do things with our fellow residents, not for them. We will offer support to those in our area who need it the most but we want more people to realise that they are stakeholders and valued members of our community and that they too can help to bring about lasting change and improvement.

Local people, working collaboratively with and for local people, alongside our partners. That's our vision.

# Contents

<b>Setting the scene</b>	<b>3</b>
Background on the Big Local Programme	3
A brief overview of the context faced by the community land movement	4
The importance of common land; green spaces, wellbeing and austerity	6
Big Localism, inequality and austerity	8
Growing community ownership and management	9
<b>Case studies</b>	<b>12</b>
Turning gaps into treasures (Ridge Hill Big Local)	12
The long-term view, flexibility and peer learning (Westfield Big Local)	14
From liability to Asset (Arches Big Local)	16
Challenges in asset transfer (North Cleethorpes Big Local)	17
Neighbourhood planning (Growing Together Big Local)	18
<b>Reflections</b>	<b>20</b>
Asset or Liability? (on green space and community)	20
Thinking and working differently - Community right to manage	21
The challenges of formal processes like asset transfer	22
<b>Visions for the future</b>	<b>24</b>
Big Local Areas as Place Shapers	24
Big Local Areas as Place Makers	25
Big Local Areas as Place Keepers	28
From individual to collective action	29
<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>31</b>

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# Setting the scene

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In September 2017, Shared Assets was commissioned by Local Trust to research and provide support to Big Local areas who wanted to take on ownership or management of land and green spaces. This publication is based on research and conversations during the initial stages of rolling out the support we offer to Big Local areas. It aims to share the learnings from the Big Local areas and situate them within the wider context to give insights which might be useful for funders, policy makers or people working on the ground.

## Background to the Big Local programme

Local Trust was formed in 2010 with a multimillion-pound endowment from the Big Lottery. Its remit is to target communities that have been overlooked for funding and resources in the past, and that may be facing issues such as the decline of local industry, high levels of unemployment, or a pressing need for new support services or activities. To do this, Local Trust created the Big Local programme to give 150 underserved communities in England £1 million each over ten years, with very few rules except that activities and spending must be based on residents' views and desires.

In each area a local steering group was recruited and a 'locally trusted organisation' appointed to be the administrator of the funds. Local Trust employs Big Local reps, who also provide ongoing support for the groups as well as a connection to wider networks and expertise. Steering-group membership is not fixed over time, and in some cases reps and locally trusted organisations

have changed over the years. As for the million pounds itself, it is held by Local Trust and drawn down as and when steering groups produce evidenced plans of the community's needs and aspirations for actions.

After a separately funded set-up period, this experiment is around its half-way mark (although each area has taken a different length of time to set up), and Shared Assets is one of a number of organisations now providing supportive consultancy to Big Local areas. Like many communities across the UK, many Big Local areas are exploring the potential for taking on the ownership or management of land and buildings, which can help them meet their aspirations to build stronger local economies, local jobs and more empowered local citizens.

What follows are my reflections on how the Big Local programme fits, or could fit, with that wider community land movement. I suggest we need to see Big Local as an experiment in economic democracy, and that there are a number of lessons that can be drawn from the experiences of these pioneer areas for communities



in post-austerity Britain and those wanting to support them. Those key lessons are:

- Communities are best placed to change the tide and regenerate their area, but they need the resources and power to do this.
- Control of assets such as land can give a crucial resource to community groups stepping in to fill the gaps left by cuts, or to those in long-term, underserved locales.
- Where it has been fractured, the social infrastructure that communities need to draw their power from has to be nurtured, with time and space to grow. You can't set a deadline on achieving a sense of community.

- A longer-term and more flexible view of funding is needed, with mechanisms to ensure communities are in control and empowered, not just trying to reach targets.
- Old structures and concepts of public or private need to be rethought, and more collaborative or collective ways of working explored and implemented.
- Alongside this new, accountable forms of governance will be needed.
- Relationships are crucial for collaborative working. In our society money speaks and can get communities 'a seat at the table' to have their say.
- Legislation, such as the Localism Act, has gone some way to supporting communities in taking control, but needs to be amended to tip the balance of power more in their favour.

## **A brief overview of the context faced by the community land movement**

*Land ownership is still concentrated in the hands of the aristocracy. Although to some extent control of land has shifted over time, the neoliberal agenda has led to a number of policies that have supported the growth of concentrated ownership among a few private actors and led to high land prices.*

Community groups or organisations that want to take over land in their areas have to operate within the land system—a polarised, unequal and often mysterious set of rules, prices, history and ideology.

In England and Wales, land ownership is still polarised between private landowners, including individuals, and the state. Clear information is hard to come by, but the most informed statistics offer a stark picture: 69% of land in the UK is owned by 0.6% of the population. 70% of the land in the UK is still agricultural, and housing is concentrated on 5% of the land, with only 64% of people having a small stake in that. A third of British land is still owned by aristocrats, and home ownership has been in decline for the past ten years.<sup>1</sup> Sir James Dyson now owns more land in England than the Queen.<sup>2</sup>

Land ownership means having control of the space around you. Without ownership, there are examples of democratic control of land use, but it is a relatively recent invention and still a work in progress. The planning profession was born from 19th- and early 20th-century progressives imagining utopian settlements, mostly driven by a desire for health and social justice. It was not until 1947 that the Town and Country Planning Act was brought in, which, along with the establishment of the NHS and the building of the New Towns, set the post-war tone for social-justice mechanisms which are and were controlled centrally.

Moving forward to the 1970s, against a background of high inflation, unemployment and strong unions, neoliberalism was sowing its seeds.

Privatisation of public services and assets, such as through the winding up of the New Town Corporations, saw a massive shift of ownership from the state to the private sector.<sup>3</sup> Between 1980 and 1985 some £500 million worth of commercial and industrial assets were sold to the private sector. This move from state to private ownership has continued, with private landlords now owning almost 40% of all former council homes from the government's Right to Buy scheme.<sup>4</sup> This redistribution of land could have been equalising but over time has resulted in a new concentration of commercial ownership, with land seen as an asset to turn profit, rather than a natural resource necessary to meet people's basic needs or human rights.

Land is a great investment option: according to the Valuation Office, the average price of agricultural land in England is £21,000 per hectare, while land with planning permission for housing is around £6m per hectare.<sup>5</sup> This has led to an industry of multi-million-pound, land-promotion companies—modern-day 'land barons', who take on the risky and sometimes lengthy process of acquiring land and getting planning permission for it.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, communities that live near this land are unable to use it.

This is not the only reason that land is treated as a financial investment; land-use policy and legislation also play a role. Forestry was one of the top-performing

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<sup>1</sup> Facts collated by the Land Justice Network from various sources, including 'Who Owns Britain', Kevin Cahill. Available at: [landjustice.uk/category/resources/read/](http://landjustice.uk/category/resources/read/)

<sup>2</sup> 'Sir James Dyson now owns more land in England than the Queen', *The Daily Telegraph* (28 December 2014)

<sup>3</sup> New Towns and Urban Development Corporations Bill, House of Lords Debate, January 1985

<sup>4</sup> Facts collated by the Land Justice Network from various sources, including 'Who Owns Britain', Kevin Cahill, 2001. Available at: [landjustice.uk/category/resources/read](http://landjustice.uk/category/resources/read)

<sup>5</sup> Oliver Wainwright, writing on the housing crisis and land banking for the Guardian (January 2017)

<sup>6</sup> *The modern-day barons: inside the murky underbelly of land promotion*, Isabelle Fraser, *The Telegraph* (August, 2017)

assets between 2015-17, with the further benefit that, after two years, commercial sites are entitled to 100% business property relief and no capital gains tax.<sup>7</sup> Woodland and agricultural land are also exempt from inheritance tax, further adding to the draw of 'banking' your wealth in them. While some land uses like forestry are seen as a safe commercial bet, the spaces that many people value most—their local parks, green spaces and amenity land—are not valued at all by the current system and indeed are under threat of development.

It is against this complex backdrop that communities looking to take control of the land around them have to operate. There has always been a strong tradition of communal, common-good or community-led control of land in the UK, from the medieval commons through to the Diggers, the settlement movement and bodies such as development trusts. These non-market, non-state forms of ownership and control have become particularly important in the 21st century, and particularly since the financial crash in 2008. That is why I am asking if the experiences of communities in Big Local areas taking on land can offer inspiration to the next generation of common-good land users in the wider community land movement.

## The importance of common land: green spaces, wellbeing and austerity

*Green spaces have been scientifically shown to be important for wellbeing, and provide multiple benefits for communities. But they are at risk—austerity has led to pressure on the provision of green spaces by local authorities and weak policy has added further potential for their loss. However, some creative responses have been enacted.*

The importance of green, open spaces in urban environments has been recognised for as long as cities have been around, and formally so since the industrial revolution, when planning controls were brought in to allow circulation of 'fresh air', seen as fundamental in preventing various ailments. Over the years, scientific study of these benefits has continued: for example, participants in a 1991 study, who viewed nature instead of urban settings, experienced a more complete and rapid recovery from stress.<sup>8</sup> Beyond this, green spaces are vital meeting places for communities—a neutral ground, often with few socio-economic or religious connotations. Particularly in underserved communities, they are some of the last 'commons' spaces, free to access and use—for now.

We have been living under austerity policies for the last ten years, and they are continuing. This means that between 2015 and 2020 local authority core funding will have been slashed by 77%, and that by the 2019/20 budgetary year almost half of all councils will no longer receive any core

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<sup>7</sup> 'Does buying woodland instead of property make financial sense', The Financial Times (March 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Facts collated by forestry/urban greening research from a variety of studies: Available at: [depts.washington.edu/hhwb/Thm\\_StressPhysiology.html](https://depts.washington.edu/hhwb/Thm_StressPhysiology.html)



central government funding.<sup>9</sup> Provision of parks services is not a statutory duty for local authorities, so it is common to see parks budgets reduced by 30 - 50% and in some cases up to 100%. Recent pressure to meet house-building targets only puts further pressure on remaining green spaces and plots, despite their being central to creating good places that people want to live in.

Clearly, civil servants and local authority officers do recognise the value of green spaces, and restructuring through austerity has laid fertile ground for new ideas and ways of working. Some local authorities have established new charitable organisations or not-for-profit enterprises, others have attempted to engage volunteers or have handed assets over to local community or 'friends of' groups. Unfortunately, in some cases parks are being, or have been, sold off—mostly in order to fund management of other green spaces within the area. One positive

example of community land management is the Chiltern Rangers,<sup>10</sup> which spun out from Wycombe District Council as a social enterprise in 2013. They now manage thirteen nature reserves and provide training, employment and volunteering opportunities, health and wellbeing services, and a community minibus. In 2016 they had a turnover of £215k and a surplus of £49k. The question is, how can these exceptions become the rule?



**With all this brutal austerity which comes from the failure of corporate capitalism there are some very creative things emerging out of necessity. There is a very creative response to quite a big mess."**

**Matthew Brown, Cabinet Member for Social Justice, Inclusion and Policy**

Preston City Council

<sup>9</sup> 'Local councils to see central funding fall 77% by 2020', The Financial Times (July 2017).

<sup>10</sup> From the website [chilternrangers.co.uk](http://chilternrangers.co.uk).

## Big localism, inequality and austerity

*Localism reflects a wider movement and is embraced by both the left and right. However, structural inequalities exist and could be worsened through localism. Catalysts for underserved areas are needed and the Big Local Programme may offer useful insights for this.*

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### **We're in the politics of doing things, not the politics of politics."**



Stephen Perez, Arches Big Local, 2017

In 2010, an inconclusive general election resulted in the formation of a coalition government. With it came the Localism Act (2011)—the distillation of ideas which had been percolating for some time, including 'the big society'. The Localism Act devolved more powers and accountability to councils and communities, and provided various community rights such as the Right to Challenge, the Right to Bid and the Right to Build, as well as providing the legislative framework for neighbourhood planning.<sup>11</sup> Localism is an interesting concept. It has origins on the left<sup>12</sup> and right,<sup>13</sup> and in EU law.<sup>14</sup> Its core concepts of people doing things for themselves and of communities having power appeal both to those who wish to reduce the role of the state, and those who wish to see a more bottom-up approach to power and decision making.

*"We are optimists. We believe that when people are given the freedom to take responsibility, they start achieving things on their own and they're possessed with new dynamism. Multiply this transformation by millions of people and you'll get an idea of why we are so passionate about this power shift." David Cameron, The Observer, 12 September 2010*

But 'optimism' and 'freedom' are not enough on their own: not every community or area starts in the same place and therefore can't respond equally to the opportunities offered. And when one hand offers localism and the other pulls back with austerity you end up with a Jekyll-and-Hyde<sup>15</sup> effect, which can prevent community groups, where they exist, being able to step up, take risks or take on more responsibilities.

The Big Local programme was formed around the time the Localism Act became law. Its structure responds to known problems with large-scale funding or regeneration programmes. One such issue is funders or organisations parachuting in without knowing the community, and then disappearing before change has really been embedded. Another is community projects just getting going and the funding running out. Thirdly, and most importantly to our discussion of inequality and localism, are the barriers to fundraising, investment and taking action where the social

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<sup>11</sup> The Localism Act 2011. Available at: [legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/20/contents](http://legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/20/contents).

<sup>12</sup> 'Communities in control: real people, real power' (Labour White Paper, 2008)

<sup>13</sup> 'Total politics: Labour's command state' (Greg Clark, 2003); 'Control shift: returning power to local communities' (Responsibility Agenda Policy Green Paper No.9, Conservative Government, 2011)

<sup>14</sup> The subsidiary principle, adopted in the Maastricht Treaty (1992)

<sup>15</sup> Hambleton, R. (2011) A Jekyll and Hyde localism bill? *Town and Country Planning* 80 (1). pp. 24-26

infrastructure and skills to navigate bureaucracy don't exist in a community. These are challenges that I have come across in my work and were restated many times by people I interviewed from Big Local areas.

The Big Local delivery framework could be seen as reflective of early government thinking about localism, and has grown up in tandem with the roll-out of localism. The Big Local guidelines specifically state it should not replace statutory funding, but the timing has been serendipitous. As one Big Local interviewee stated *"It was obvious from the beginning that a lot of the community centres were staffed by council staff who are now gone, there are so many cuts, there are so many gaps... we don't want to replace statutory funding but we do want to work with young people, so how do we do that creatively? For us it's about bringing people together and making them realise how they could work together to do something in the community. We wanted to fill the gaps."* These creative responses offer useful insights for post-austerity and underserved communities and those who work with them. The overall framework of Big Local may also offer insights into how we could intervene with the equalisation necessary for localism to really work.

## Growing community ownership and management

*Community control of land is growing, it is supported but could be more so.*

Against this backdrop, the movement of communities taking over and running formerly public assets has grown, creating income streams to support service provision.

The Localism Act of 2011 has been described by some as strengthening the existing ability of councils to transfer the ownership of public assets to community organisations at less than market value. However, as currently written, there is no guarantee the outcome of a bid will fall in the communities' favour. The community right to bid is really just a right to express an interest in acquiring a (private or public) property, and is far from the more powerful community right to buy<sup>16</sup> that exists in Scotland. Despite this there are many commendable, community-led initiatives, building on the success of pioneers such as Hill Holt Wood (whose enterprise predates the legislation). Hill Holt Wood have managed an ancient woodland since 2006 and now have a £2 million turnover, while offering various services to their community, such as training and a health and wellbeing programme.

Scotland offers us much in terms of insights into and lessons on community empowerment: between 1996 and 2016 over 150 communities have become landowners. With an underlying aim of achieving one million acres of land in community ownership by 2020, the Community Empowerment Act (2015)

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<sup>16</sup> [brodies.com/binformed/legal-updates/how-has-the-community-right-to-buy-in-scotland-changed](http://brodies.com/binformed/legal-updates/how-has-the-community-right-to-buy-in-scotland-changed)

has a presumption in favour of communities: for example, in the case of asset transfers, it is up to a public body to prove reasonable grounds for refusal. Among other things it requires formation of partnerships to create Local Outcome Improvement Plans, extends community right to buy and includes

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 **provision for community bodies to purchase land which is abandoned, neglected or causing harm to the environmental wellbeing of the community, where the owner is not willing to sell that land.”<sup>17</sup>**

The Land Reform Act (2003, 2016) provides for a public register of not just ownership but also ‘persons with a controlling interest in’ land, and the government-backed Scottish Land Fund provides grants of up to £1 million. This supportive environment, along with a different culture around

land in Scotland, has led to 200 community woodlands and numerous examples of community buy-outs, such as the recent Isle of Ulva success. The Isle once had a population of 600, now reduced to six; after a successful campaign they secured £4 million of government funding in 2018 to buy the island and restart the local economy.

A recent example of widespread community action around land in England was sparked when central government proposed to sell off national Forestry Commission land in 2010.<sup>18</sup> They then quickly did a U-turn in 2011 following a public outcry. This has accelerated the woodland social- enterprise sector as communities mobilise to keep their beloved spaces.

The rest of this discussion looks at some of these creative and enterprising responses and how they have played out in different ways in Big Local areas, and what lessons can be learnt.

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<sup>17</sup> [beta.gov.scot/publications/community-empowerment-scotland-act-summary/](https://beta.gov.scot/publications/community-empowerment-scotland-act-summary/)

<sup>18</sup> [theguardian.com/environment/2010/oct/29/uk-government-forest-sell-off](https://theguardian.com/environment/2010/oct/29/uk-government-forest-sell-off)



# Case studies

## Turning gaps into treasures

### Ridge Hill Big Local

In most cases communities go beyond filling the gaps. I went to visit Ridge Hill Big Local in Stalybridge, where the community has taken on two lakes within a park, setting up a social enterprise which obtained a 25-year lease from the council. In the wake of austerity, the council had already put it out to a third-party private enterprise; but despite good intentions, the previous owner ended up in arrears and the council had to take legal proceedings. From this start the Big Local Group were able to open negotiations, made easier by their existing relationship. Being part of Big Local was pivotal to their success in more than just monetary terms:

**“It wouldn’t have even been considered without Big Local, because we wouldn’t have been in a position to pitch for it. We’re organized as a group now, we have the social enterprise idea... and we have partners and the skills behind us now. It’s now in the council’s interest for us to succeed, as we are championing for them. With regards to our own involvement with them they’ve just been hugely supportive.”**

Mick, Ridge Hill Big Local

They’ve renovated one lake, making £2,500 in their first summer and gaining local approval. They are now desilting the second lake and will open it for fishing, which they hope will provide a good therapeutic outlet for some troubled families and young people in the area. They are seeking external funding to expand with kayaks and paddle boards, and have interest from local schools and Scouts groups. Future aspirations include a community garden and Incredible Edible project. As they haven’t got a money-making business yet, small grants and volunteers have been crucial, and the support of the Big Local network and funds has provided just that. It hasn’t been easy though, and their business plan maps out three years until they turn a profit. But as long as the project proves its social value, the stable base of Big Local in the

background will provide the infrastructure for the fledgling business to innovate and find its feet, so it can become a community resource for the long term.

There is a particular challenge in this area as there is a stark divide amongst the local population, with residents of very different socio-economic backgrounds living at the top and bottom of the hill. Division is rife, with stigma on both sides preventing cohesion. The area has also suffered from services parachuting in and disappearing once the money stopped, leaving a distrust of those from elsewhere coming to 'help'.



**No-one wants experts coming in and telling them what to do."**

**However, the effect of opening up and activating the public space seems to have started a ripple effect in the community. "You can't force people not to be apathetic, they either choose to or not. But now people are coming forward, they've seen what we're doing and they get inspired. Because they might think 'what can I do by myself?' but when they see what we're doing they want to be involved. Austerity has forced a lot of good will, it's a bit perverse but austerity has forced people to come together and look after each other. At one point the council were like your mum and dad, doing everything for you. Now people have realised you can either work together with the council or set up your own group to do something about it."**

Mick, Ridge Hill Big Local

The project has been supported by many local people giving time or materials, for example to fix a leaking roof, or just volunteering to keep the boat rental open and affordable. The hope is that the lake can become an animator for community cohesion and action, with the younger generation meeting each other, and a sense of pride restored.

Another big focus for the project is upskilling—supporting volunteers to shadow roles and get training in an informal way to lead them into jobs. The council has been offering further assets to the group, such as a disused crazy-golf site nearby, but a cautious approach is being taken, with other local partners being brought in. Here again the Big Local framework is a good stimulus, with the steering-group structure lending itself to creating a local network of the community minded.

My feeling of visiting the site was how much potential there was, only emphasised further by the enthusiasm and dedication of the project volunteers and workers I spoke to. These visible activations of areas, led by local people for local people, feel like they have real potential to counter the disenfranchisement and disconnection which has grown in some places. Whether that will be the case in Ridge Hill remains to be seen, but the ingredients are there.

# The long-term view, flexibility and peer learning

## Westfield Big Local

Westfield Big Local (Sheffield) got an asset transfer of a local community centre in 2015, crucial because it was their only remaining community space.

**“Had we not successfully negotiated the asset transfer of the building, our estate would have no meeting place, no community centre, therefore no youth club and as a consequence the heart of this community would have been torn out.”**

(Roger Tew, Westfield BL)

Since then the only GP practice on the estate has also closed. The council could only afford to keep the community centre open on an ad-hoc basis anyway, not when the community wanted. Now it's open 9 - 5 every day and beyond, with groups coming every evening, and events all day every day.

It wasn't easy, but luckily the group was able to get pro bono support from local professionals—initially a surveyor who gave a report to open the negotiations, and later a lawyer who sat in on negotiation sessions.

**“By the time we met again with the council, we felt very well prepared. We were able to be hard-nosed negotiators, and as a consequence, re-negotiated the lease to suit our needs and purposes. For example, we negotiated to be able to choose qualified local people for the maintenance of the building, rather than taking over the council's arrangement with a large company.”**

Roger, Westfield BL

At first the group felt at a disadvantage not having expertise in the asset transfer process and travelled all over the country talking to people, learning the pitfalls so they could avoid them. The Big Local network was useful both in finding the right expertise and connecting to peers at this early stage. Actually, they soon realised the council also lacked practical expertise. *“I think it ended up being a learning process for everyone. Because we learnt the process together we came together in a new way.”* They now report having a good working relationship with the council.

The long-term view and flexibility in funding of the Big Local programme was crucial in the process. *"We've had a lot of help, but you never know what you don't know. There's a lot of chicken and egg, you can't apply for funding until you know what's going on with it, but you can't enter into an agreement with the council until you have the money..."* The pace of this work can be erratic, both funding and expertise are most useful on an ad-hoc basis, and having the time and ability to properly negotiate the details of a lease is important. For example, Big Local Westfield negotiated a break clause that, if they weren't able to continue as an organisation, they could hand back the buildings without any implications. Being part of the Big Local helps navigate this uncertainty, as the money is guaranteed and the programme has the flexibility needed for negotiations that can sometimes take years, depending on the site, relationships and existing procedures.

For Westfield Big Local, the launch of the centre really raised its profile in the area, and it came together in the magic way that community things sometimes can. Someone's friend did a hog roast, and word got out about a local racing driver coming down, which attracted a mass visit from some local motor bikers. So they ended up with quite an event for an estate with a recent history of bad publicity. As was reported by other areas, doing something tangible showed local people *"it wasn't hot air"*, and after that the project took off.

The Big Local now has a 25-year lease, but they are not sure yet whether they want to extend the lease or try to acquire the community centre. There is a feeling that even just on a lease it will be an important part of the legacy, and the group is putting surplus revenue into reserves to extend the length of time the Big Local programme will be able to run in their area.



**Now the community centre will be there for 25 years, so if you imagine... the young people who have been frequenting it now will be running it... It's been a worthwhile venture."**

Roger, Westfield BL



# From liability to asset

## Arches Big Local

[facebook.com/ArchesLocal/](https://facebook.com/ArchesLocal/)

The community at Arches Big Local (Chatham) have reclaimed their local park which, overgrown and undermanaged, was being used by local drug dealers and considered a dangerous place to go. Visiting it now, and seeing children playing in a new and brightly coloured wooden play area among well-kept grass, with a conspicuous absence of litter, you wouldn't guess its past. Stephen Perez told me how in the past S106 money <sup>[1]</sup> had been allocated elsewhere, and showed me a pitiful, tiny court area, devoid of goals or basketball hoops, provided by a local European grant development project. Big Local has been instrumental in changing that. *"The best thing Big Local did is get us to the tables to have the discussions we needed to."* Apathy had been the main currency in this underserved locale: *"This area has had no funding, nothing happens here. The first change was a change in apathy levels that then pushed forward change and gave the drive for people to apply for funding and have matching funding to put towards projects."* Again, it was taking visible action which started the change, and the group actually managed to treble the money

spent from their Big Local pot by raising further external funds when developing the pocket-park play area. They don't want to own the park either, as they have no income streams for the management. There has been discussion of getting fitness classes running, but so far, the trainers don't want to come as they don't think they will get enough business there.

Despite holding regular events, such as their successful 'litter and natter' (where locals come and pick up litter and have a chat), they also don't want to create a formal 'friends of' group for the park. *"People in the area don't deal well with authority, a friends-of-park group wouldn't work here because people don't work well with structure. At the moment the park is the responsibility of everyone—we don't put up signs about 'I did this' or 'they did that'. That's the best way it works, otherwise everything just becomes the council's responsibility or someone else's responsibility. Maybe in five to ten years' time nothing will be happening here again, but the important thing is what we're doing now."* Visiting the area and watching Stephen enthusiastically greet many residents whom we walked past I was inspired, but did wonder about legacy. So many community projects hinge on the energy of one person or a few people. What is certain, however, is that those young children and their families are now benefiting from accessing this resource, and perhaps the connections made at the community events held there can ripple out to a more cohesive and active community over time. Perhaps they will really create a culture of the park as their 'common land'.

<sup>[1]</sup> Section 106 is a mechanism which obligates developers to provide amenity/community infrastructure for the developments they are building, e.g. parks or schools.

# Challenges in asset transfer

## North Cleethorpes Big Local

[facebook.com/  
BigLocalNorthCleethorpes/](https://facebook.com/BigLocalNorthCleethorpes/)

In North Cleethorpes Big Local, one of the focuses of community activation has been on improving the appearance of the area and reclaiming land owned, but not currently managed, by the council. Here too, as with many unmanaged areas, antisocial behaviour plagues the site—littering is rife and scramble bikers use the area making it dangerous for walkers. Residents currently carry out their own litter pick but, unfortunately, *"The prevailing attitude seems to be that, being land that the council are not interested in, littering is acceptable. It would be our intention to return the land to a pleasant space, possibly with signage advising users that the land is community owned and should be treated with respect....the hope being that residents would become 'wardens' of 'their' property, and that scramble-bike riders would be challenged or threatened with private prosecution."* (John Mooney, North Cleethorpes Big Local)

Big Local North Cleethorpes are in discussion with the local council about the land but have faced a common challenge in community asset transfers —that elected members don't find it easy to hand power to communities.

Some councils now have 'handing services or assets to community or to enterprise' as part of their budget-cut strategies, so the time for changing ownership structures is ripe. But it's also challenging for communities to 'tick the boxes' to move the process forward. This is a challenge I have seen around the country, as asset transfers are still new to many councils (also described in the Growing Together case study) and the process can feel like a resource-intensive game of ping pong. Too often the council requests information that is a huge effort for the community to provide—such as fully costed business plans—only to later request that details, or even fundamental issues such as the footprint of a building, are redone. While this may be common practice when dealing with the private sector, as John Mooney from North Cleethorpes says, *"Approaching community management processes the same way you approach commercial processes doesn't work.."*

This reflects the challenge of recognising the very different nature, including the value, of new business models focused on social outcomes, where collaboration and trust are critical elements for success. John knows this and is trying to work with council officers to create a new kind of process for these new kinds of business models that reduces the burden on both sides.

# Neighbourhood planning

(Growing Together Big Local)

[growingtogether.org.uk](http://growingtogether.org.uk)



**We're writing the rulebook the way we want it to be written; we're saying what they can and can't do, and they have to take it into account."**

(Peter Strachan, Growing Together Big Local)

In my investigations, the main way Big Local areas have taken control of buildings and land is through asset transfer. However, there are at least two which have instigated Neighbourhood Development Plans (NDPs). These are statutory documents which sit underneath the council's Local Plan and have legislative power in planning decisions. They can either be created by a parish or town council or a neighbourhood forum and must be based on consultation with local residents. Neighbourhood forums can be formed by groups of 21 residents where a parish or town council doesn't exist.

I spoke to Peter Strachan from Growing Together Big Local (Northampton) who have developed such a plan. In their case they formed a neighbourhood forum with exactly the same boundary line as the Big Local area, and found being part of the Big Local process had a laid a good grounding. *"Because we'd just done an intensive consultation exercise for the Big Local plan, we had a good idea of what local perceptions and aspirations were. Although it's a different set of questions—one is about 'how do you want us to spend money' and the other is about 'what do you want or not want to happen in your area'—it's all about local people having more of a say."* In their case they had actually been approached by the council, and there are currently five other underserved communities in the Northampton going through the neighbourhood planning process. At one time there was political will within the local authority to push the initiative forward, which may have led to this. For Growing Together Big Local it made sense, as they'd realised that what they wanted to do with Big Local money would require planning permission: writing the intended uses into the planning framework would clearly facilitate this. Their referendum took place in February 2017, with a 92% yes vote in favour of the NDP.



**I started off a bit sceptical about neighbourhood planning, and am now a real enthusiast for it. It has allowed us to influence the local authority in ways we couldn't have otherwise."**

Peter

The main policies written by the community included protection of eleven key green spaces, from woodland to small green areas around houses; guidance about design; protecting community facilities; and the prioritisation of three eyesore sites for development. The three sites, which included a derelict pub and two old school sites, are now all going through the development process. They also had a win in protecting one of their green spaces, making the council do a U-turn on a recommended sale of the land before the Neighbourhood Plan had

even passed its referendum. They haven't faced much resistance in protecting their green spaces, but Peter told me he knew of another neighbourhood forum which had been taken to court by a developer. The support from the council is also unfortunately not common: "A lot of people have struggled going head-to-head with their council when trying to make their plans, but we didn't have that. The support we had, from cabinet members to front-line planners, was exemplary. It was one of the best experiences of partnership working I've ever had."



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# Reflections

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During my conversations, it appeared that in some Big Local areas there wasn't any green or open space, and others I talked to were fighting to save the last or only green space within their local area. We really are at a critical moment with this, as once land is sold and developed it's very hard to get it back. A big question for me during my investigations was, how can we re-green urban estates that have lost their provision? Could initiatives such as Big Local spark the community energy to re-activate this? In our current crisis there are so many gaps, and so many people are struggling, that we really need to make sure green space does not fall completely off the list, to be lost forever.

## Asset or liability? (on green space and community)

*Green spaces can easily become liabilities, falling in to a vicious cycle. The question is how to change the tide?*



**The community centre has put the heart back in the community."**

Big Local Westfield

I think community is an action, not a description—it's the smile and greeting to your neighbour, the conversation with the shopkeeper. I imagine it to be like neurons in your brain—similarly to neurons, communities aren't fixed, new connections can be made and the formation changes

all the time as people move in and out. But whenever enough of these connections spark close enough together you get a conscious community moment, and it's just magical—the feeling of being in your place, of being at home, of being supported.

The challenge is that we need places in which to carry out the 'act of community', and I feel green spaces can provide this. As mentioned in the introduction, they are neutral ground, not linked to cultural, religious or socio-economic background. Importantly (at least for now), they are also free and could be seen as some of the last surviving commons. They truly are assets to communities, and communities know that. However, they can easily become liabilities.

Litter and dog mess are symptoms of

a lack of ownership by the community, and in some underserved areas the green spaces seem to have fallen off the end of the council's budget sheets many years ago, let alone with the deep cuts happening now. Poorly maintained areas become an eyesore and fall into a cycle where people don't go there because it's not a nice place to go. Once they are semi-abandoned, antisocial behaviour and drug-taking often follow, further driving others away and leaving the space to be claimed by those wild souls who find solace in self-medication, where expressive potential has been crushed into anger and frustration, and identity and self-importance have been shaped through this to people forming their own clans and gangs. Conversely, the more activity you have on the park, the less antisocial behaviour you will get and the more people will come, as it's a nice place to be. But how to move from a vicious to a virtuous cycle? And what identity, purpose and space for being wild can be offered to young souls who need such things to flourish? From the examples above, it seems on the first point that bottom-up action, accompanied by investment led by the community, can be effective. The second point is not the main focus for this discussion, but it should not be forgotten, and youth services, opportunity and employment are high on the priorities of all Big Local areas I talked to. In many cases local green-space initiatives were tackling these as part of their work, this kind of joined-up systemic thinking seeming to come more naturally to communities than to bureaucrats, which is why collaboration between the two is key.

## Thinking and working differently—community right to manage

*Asset-transfer legislation needs to be widened: there are a number of suggestions which have been put forward for different ways of working which could be considered.*

In places such as Arches Big Local, communities are not looking for ownership and are managing their green spaces and assets informally. However, the majority I spoke to were looking at leases and management agreements, as these are opportunities to make new partnerships between councils and communities. The community may be mistrustful, especially if they have been severely underserved and feel their interests are not looked after. Understanding the shortfalls of traditional consultation and applying best practice in co-design and non-hierarchical collaborative processes can help get past this, but it requires both the council and community organisers to buy in to new ways of thinking and working.

In 2010, Mark Walton of Shared Assets proposed a 'Community Right to Manage' as something missing from the Localism Act. This would remove the focus on ownership, encourage collaborative working, and allow communities to focus on building businesses around the assets. There is also an argument to be made that fragmenting ownership of public assets (whether through transfer of freeholds or long leases) leaves them vulnerable, and compromising robust governance reduces accountability in the system. Further, green spaces and other environmental assets may have fewer income streams and

opportunities for enterprise than building assets; they require more of a portfolio or partnership approach than the more straightforward handing over of responsibilities that asset transfer often entails.

In a similar vein, the Crown Estate in Scotland implemented local management agreements—simple, tailored agreements intended to circumvent the chicken-and-egg situation of asset transfers which may, for example, ask communities to demonstrate a track record. In reality, the successful agreements were also accompanied by support and expertise to get initiatives off the ground, and relationships between key individuals were again cited as important.

If the Localism Act is renewed, the place to begin thinking about a community right to manage may be in reviewing the current Community Right to Challenge. As it is currently framed, the right to challenge only sparks a public procurement process for a particular service. It doesn't offer a route into community management of public services, nor does it necessarily promote the creation of innovative management models. Locality has recently proposed replacing it with a 'Services Partnership Power' to refocus on collaborative approaches.<sup>19</sup> These ideas are backed by the 2014 EU Procurement Directives,<sup>20</sup> which sought to bring in a balance of considerations to public tendering, including potential for 'innovation partnerships' to be formed between local authorities and wider bodies in the creation and management of services. Could we have community innovation partnerships forming the public services of the future, co-created with the citizens who will benefit from them?

## The challenges of formal processes like asset transfer

*Community control of land is crucial to save our green spaces; however, there are challenges in accessing information, relationship building and the lack of knowledge of possibility models. The Big Local framework can help negate these.*

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**W** It makes a difference, because historically councils haven't really listened. Now they do and that's empowering. With landowners not so much, but because of the different relationship with the council you can have more influence. Traditionally landowners would pit the council against community groups, now they face a joined-up front so the path of least resistance is to do as we ask."

Ross Miller, Dover Big Local

Being a Big Local area has advantages in the relationship-building crucial to success in creating new models of land management. Again and again, those involved in Big Local areas told me that with the money behind them people took them more seriously. "Just because there's a million pounds sat in the bank makes the local authorities take you seriously. When you're a community group with £3,000 in the bank the council don't take you seriously. When you have a million pounds, they are beating down your door. It gives you a relationship to the council that you wouldn't otherwise get. It creates this bank of influence, so over time you have this bank account of influence even if the money decreases."

Ross Miller (Dover Big Local).

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<sup>[19]</sup> People power – report from the Commission on the Future of Localism, Locality (2017)

<sup>[20]</sup> Brief guide to the 2014 Directives, Crown Commercial Service (2016)



One challenge faced by groups is that risk-averse councils don't make it easy to access the information needed for feasibility exercises—for example, the current maintenance costs associated with the land. In some cases, the information is not even known, as it is just a small part of a large contract. Access to information is linked to relationship-and trust-building, and there is often a 'journey' to asset transfers where informal management leads to formal, then later more responsibility, until eventually the asset is transferred.

For many groups starting as informal, the journey to 'professionalise' is not easy, and underserved areas may lack social infrastructure in terms of formal groups. The structures in the Big Local programme, in the form of reps, locally trusted organisations and training provided, go some way to supporting these processes, and having the no-pressure, ten-year time frame may allow it to happen more naturally.

An oft-stated phrase within the circles of those involved is that 'asset transfers can easily be liability transfers'—a real danger for enthusiastic groups focused on social outcomes rather than the

bottom line. Support to create robust business models and understand implications of asset management is essential, as is accessing information on which to base those business models. You may also notice that some of the examples used in this discussion relate to building assets rather than land. As discussed, taking on land can be more challenging, with less obvious ways to 'sweat' the asset. This means 'possibility models' are extremely valuable, both for empowering groups and reassuring nervous councils. Peer-to-peer support is valued by groups for this, as well as for avoiding pitfalls. Being part of a wider network such as Big Local or others—for example Locality or the Community Land Trust Network— can enable this. Peer learning is a difficult feat when you talk about 150 Big Local areas across the country, but is something emphasised through regular meetups in different locations, with transport fees paid for attendees.

Care also needs to be taken that forms of ownership ensure that assets are locked in for the benefit of the community in the long term and encourage collective action.

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# Visions for the future

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In my discussions and travels I was very interested in how the financial crash and austerity had affected the areas I was visiting; but, repeatedly, the response was that things had been bad there for so long it hadn't been felt. So perhaps these underserved areas give us an insight into the challenges post-austerity communities might face, and have much to offer in how communities could be enabled to take control to change or prevent that.

It should also be remembered that the amount of money actually given in this experiment per person is relatively small. Given that the median population in Big Local Areas is 6,800,<sup>22</sup> £1 million over ten years is only around £14.70 per resident per year. Compare that to the average Band D council tax set by local authorities in 2017-18 of £1,591<sup>23</sup> and you get an idea of the scale: Big Local cannot be a replacement for current statutory services

## Big Local areas as place shapers

*When empowered with the right tools, communities can shape their locales really effectively, and a few legislative mechanisms exist that could support this.*

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 **Local leadership, local capacity and public assent must all come together in a meaningful way at the right time."**

*David Walker, journalist (2018)*

As you have read in the examples above, despite the small amount of money, some Big Local areas have been highly effective in kick-starting a regeneration shift in their area that doesn't leave people behind. How can this place-shaper influence be fostered and channelled going forward?

Progressive procurement practice<sup>24</sup> and 'innovation partnerships' are mechanisms Big Local areas could be looking towards as they build up the 'bank of local influence' that Ross Miller from Dover talked about. The Centre for Urban Research on Austerity proposes 'Joint Action Boards'<sup>25</sup> to agree local priorities and ensure delivery includes involvement of smaller voluntary

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<sup>22</sup> Local Trust website (page no longer available)

<sup>23</sup> Council tax levels set by local authorities: England 2017-18, DCLG

<sup>24</sup> Example at: [cles.org.uk/the-preston-model/](http://cles.org.uk/the-preston-model/)

<sup>25</sup> Centre for Urban Research on Austerity (2016), 'The London Communities Commission: Building Local Capacity'. Available at: [cura.our.dmu.ac.uk/2016/03/08/the-london-communities-commission-building-local-capacity/](http://cura.our.dmu.ac.uk/2016/03/08/the-london-communities-commission-building-local-capacity/)


organisations. These sound like a more general version of the neighbourhood planning area structures previously implemented in Bristol, and Community Planning Partnerships in Scotland. Perhaps after ten years, the social infrastructure of an activated participating community in a Big Local area could provide the perfect ground for such bodies. However, there is the danger of a lack of accountability. A big criticism of bodies such as Local Enterprise Partnerships is their undemocratic nature. Any such structure also needs the ability to act quickly and give clear action-reaction feedback: if people participate and don't see action from it, apathy can quickly return. Local, democratically accountable forms of governance will be needed to oversee a new community-owned and run social economy.

I share Peter's (Growing Together Big Local) view that neighbourhood development plans can be an important tool as a way for land-use control to be implemented by those with the community at the centre of their vision, rather than profit or the bottom line. It is also of note that community forums with an NDP in place keep 25% of the Community Infrastructure Levy charged (instead of 15%) for new development for their area, and must be consulted on how to spend it. I expect that, if more examples are shared of when it has been effective in preserving local green space or giving the community a voice such as those above, the movement will continue to grow. Making sure that consultation on plans is properly carried out, and making an effort to transmit messages in language people understand throughout will be crucial to its integrity as it does so. Can it foster empowerment, action and participation in local areas? Not on its own, but every time people participate and see a real reaction it spurs further action and energy to do more.

## Big Local areas as place makers

*Communities given economic control in the right way will grow their locale with a more effective type of 'inward investment', potentially leading to a more inclusive economic regeneration*

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 **Individual citizens have limited power to change the world. In order to achieve real empowerment, they need to be able to build local support structures through which they can work together and release the value of individual and collective creativity. New citizen-led ways of working also require changes in the way local communities are funded.”<sup>26</sup>**

*Centre for Urban Research on Austerity*

While there are many challenges inherent in austerity, there may also be some opportunities to change the way resources and money flow—away from the traditional, trickle-down approach to economic growth, towards real community wealth building. There is plenty of evidence that if communities were in charge of their own public spending, they would be more likely to invest in assets such as green spaces and innovative local businesses surrounding them, with a focus on wider social benefits. These internally focused, true 'inward investments' can kick-start local economic activity, sending out ripples to combine into community-led, resilient regeneration.

Could Big Local further explore its potential as an experiment in economic democracy? This feels just as important as political democracy, and makes particular

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<sup>26</sup> The London Communities Commission: Building Local Capacity, CURA (2016)



## Netherton Community Garden

Netherton Feelgood Factory is creating a community garden in the Marian Way. It's for local people to grow their own fruit, veg, herbs and flowers. Get fit, make friends, eat what you grow, learn something new!

We'll be on site most Mondays and Tuesdays, some Saturdays and Thursday evenings: details are on the gate. Come and join in!

For more info, contact Richard at the Feelgood Factory, Glovers Lane, phone **0151 291 8010** or email [richard.ayres@feelgoodfactory.org.uk](mailto:richard.ayres@feelgoodfactory.org.uk)



*L30's Million supported through Big Local and administered by Local Trust for the Big Lottery Fund*



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sense on a very local level where people are the experts in the specific challenges and opportunities of their area.

Big Local has similarities to participatory budgeting, an asset-based approach to co-producing public services. This has been trialled across the world in Brazil, America and, since 2014, in Scotland, where 1% of public spending is distributed with this mechanism. It has had differing levels of success, with criticism of the roll-out in Scotland including implementation through consultation techniques, and that amounts of money are too small once divided down to a local level. In other places it appears more successful: for example, the 'Youth leads the change' programme in Boston (USA) used a mix of online and offline interaction to reach a wide audience, with funding distribution decided through votes.

Other alternative approaches to local spending include the Local Entrepreneurship Forums started by the REconomy project, part of the Transition movement in Totnes in 2012. These events bring together local residents, entrepreneurs and investors to form a 'community of dragons'. Every year the forum gives four to five entrepreneurs the chance to pitch their ideas, and anyone present can pledge money, from fifty pounds to thousands. People also offer support in the form of expertise, tools or other resources such as office/work space. To date, more than £80,000 has been fundraised and numerous social/community ventures launched.

In my opinion, the way money is distributed is almost as important as the amount given. The Big Local programme has a bottom-up format and has faced some of the same challenges as interventions such as participatory budgeting, with a need for consistency and visible actions to build relationships and fight apathy. As it continues, lessons on innovative co-production and participation, and how these translate on the ground, could feed in to future participatory economic interventions in England or the UK.

Unfortunately, faced with the responsibility of the 'chance of a lifetime' for their community, participants easily fall back on formats they know, with small and large grant programmes, and traditional board and committee structures commonly being formed. Big Local has no rules on how areas implement community participation/governance, and has done considerable work to share new models; indeed, many participants cited inspiration for their initiatives as stemming from Big Local training or events. However, there are more tools out there, for example citizen councils,<sup>27</sup> Open Space Technology,<sup>28</sup> or even digital tools such as Polis or DemocracyOS. It would be a shame if the opportunity was missed to use these, or for further innovative models of co-production, community management and non-hierarchical governance to be explored during the Big Local experiment. In many cases organisational practice is not seen as central to delivery of the mission, but to take full advantage of the 'bank of influence' beyond the funding it may be crucial.

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<sup>27</sup> Citizens' Economic Council - RSA

<sup>28</sup> Michael Herman, 'What Is Open Space Technology?' Available at: [openspaceworld.org/wp2/what-is/](https://openspaceworld.org/wp2/what-is/)

## Big Local Areas as Place Keepers

*Long-term thinking is needed when it comes to asset management. The Big Local framework may help to grow this thinking, and the longevity/stability of projects and services may have a positive effect on young people in the areas.*

When it comes to stewardship of public assets and services, my feeling is that management and collaboration are the best path in many cases. As stated previously, localism must be played carefully to ensure that it doesn't just become a stepping stone to the privatisation of such assets, and managing an asset 'in perpetuity' (forever) is a tall order. Community groups often hinge around one or two key people who are hard to replace; business plans may rely on sources of income or volunteers that may not be there in twenty or thirty years' time. However, leases must show that long-term management by the group is being taken seriously, for example with a 125-year lease. A lease of any less than 25 years will seriously impede the group from being able to fundraise, and having stringent break clauses can also cause problems—in one case a group told me the first contract they were offered had a clause which indicated 'if the site starts making money the council can take it back'! The kind of long-term thinking needed when considering these asset projects may not always come naturally to groups who are used to funding cycles of six months, one year or three years. In fact, it's lacking in our society generally, another symptom being the average tenure of a CEO—between 6.1 and 9.7 years.<sup>29</sup> This short-termism can also be common in councils, with their political timeframes of five years. Locals who plant to be in a community for

twenty, fifty or more years, and have their children there, may be more disposed to turn to the long-term mindset needed for place-keeping.

The unusual ten-year timeframe of Big Local may aid in stimulating this longer-term thinking. It certainly gives rise to stewardship thinking: stewards traditionally did not just maintain sites but actively had to add value to them. Communities empowered to enact their own bottom-up version of regeneration absolutely look to add value in every way. Sites are not just passively managed but actively become opportunities for creating employment, providing training or tackling obesity and mental health. This 'sweating of the social value' of an asset is something that is starting to be recognised and various ways of measuring it have been proposed. Whether any of these, for example natural capital accounts or ecosystem services, do eventually lead to new sources of income for the maintenance of these spaces has yet to be shown, but the level of interest around it is promising.

I also believe that social *enterprise* is important. Over-reliance on volunteers in the long run is not a sustainable strategy, and people who are creating value should be compensated for their time and energy. Having an asset to sweat can turn a volunteer-led project into an anchor organisation for a locale, enabling the maintenance of social infrastructure which in turn enables the place-keeping role of the community. Having stability from a long-term community asset initiative may also plant a seed of change for the younger generation growing up on these estates, by providing consistent services. *"Stability of service builds trust for the children, they never had that before,*

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<sup>29</sup> Korn Ferry institute, 2017

and so when they are adults they might think differently.” (Karen, Ridge Hill Big Local).

## From individual to collective action

*For community or ‘common’ ownership to function, a move from individual to collective action is needed.*

The interesting thing about the restructuring into community ownership/management is that it could be seen as ‘commoning’, “where ‘commons’ refers to resources held in trust for, belonging to or affecting a whole community, but not under direct state control.”<sup>30</sup> This requires a different sort of thinking, where public space is not just something which is used and which councils are paid to maintain, but has a sense of ownership by the whole

community. This is in contrast to the focus on ‘protection of private property’ as enshrined in law following the second world war, and certainly in contrast to our current individualist paradigm in which things are either ‘public’ or ‘private’.

Our relationship and rights associated with land are complex in England: with so many years of patronage and control, we have lost our sense of common ownership or even of *public* spaces. We have forgotten that the emphasis on individual ownership is just a social norm, an imaginary law we can change. In fact, the number of co-operatives increased by more than 25% between 2009 and 2014<sup>31</sup> and continues to grow, as does the number of community land trusts. A change of thinking is needed for councils to become collaborators



<sup>30</sup> Governing in and against austerity: international lessons from eight cities (2017)

<sup>31</sup> The council and the common, NLGN (2014)

and facilitators, and for communities to once again become commoners—maintaining their common assets.

'Commons' work should ideally be recompensed (in monetary or other ways), and new accountable and democratic governance structures may be necessary to prevent 'the tragedy of the commons', or the marginalisation of interests. Garrett Hardin coined the phrase 'the tragedy of the commons' in a 1968 article: the concept is that individuals acting in rational self-interest whilst using common-pool resources will lead to the depletion of those resources. This was disputed by Elinor Ostrom, who argued that common resources are well managed when those who benefit from them are in close proximity to them, and that their regulation should be managed at this local level, work later acknowledged by Hardin.

This collective thinking can only work where the elusive 'sense of community' or 'sense of responsibility for the whole' exists. Feedback I got from some Big Local areas was that within the 'blank-cheque' attitude there is the danger of the loudest voices pushing their personal interest or gain and 'getting things done' in a way that fractures the community. Some form of oversight or checks and balances and warning signals need to be looked for. Reps can step in, not as top-down enforcers, rather as enablers, but this is a balance hard to get right. It should also be noted that this phenomenon has not happened in all cases, so there may be existing solutions for collective self-organisation already operating within the 150 areas. Examining what has and hasn't worked—to look for possible models for community leadership and involvement—could create a resource to be applied whilst forming new public-community entities.

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# Conclusions

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Overall, I have been energised and inspired by my interactions with Big Local areas and seeing their varied approaches to taking control of the assets and resources around them to tackle local challenges. We will wait with bated breath to see the lie of the land as the dust settles on the austerity cuts. We are living in times of great change, a restructuring of society is going on around us, and changing the status quo is now a mainstream survival tactic.

Several themes have repeatedly come to the fore in my investigations: the importance of peer networks and possibility models when implementing innovative practices; the dangers of apathy; the importance of relationships (both between key individuals and the community as a whole); and the importance of the right mechanisms for local influence on decision-making (both economic and political). By 'having the money to get to the table', groups in Big Local areas are able to have unprecedented influence in their locales, and this in turn should provide new possibility models to drive change in places not yet touched by the programme. The connection into the Big Local network broadens horizons and enables innovative thinking and risk-taking. It opens the 'narrow localism' to a national network but could go further, connecting to international examples such as the 'new municipalism' movement in Barcelona. This could give rise to the glocalism thinking talked about by Satish Kumar (think global, act local—imagining locales as connected nodes, sharing and exchanging), giving further power to the movement and the ongoing virtual

cycle of agency in creating, sharing and replicating innovative ideas.

These insights should be considered by those creating the frameworks within which communities are operating, such as funders or policy makers. Equally, those on the ground may notice some of these dynamics occurring in their own work, and I hope these examples and suggestions can be useful in this case too.

It is of note that the legislation in England is still not written to favour communities as strongly as it could or should be. We only have to look to Scotland to see a very different culture around land and land-based enterprise, which still makes up a reasonable part of their economy. Their understanding of community empowerment through ownership as a driver of regeneration gives a different tone to the agenda, and has led to compelling results, such as the repopulation of islands. Empowerment is a word often bandied around, but how to actually tip the balance of power in favour of communities is something that should be taken seriously, and with a systemic lens.





## Activate! Land in the hands of communities

For centuries land ownership has been equated with power. Yet there has always been a strong tradition of communal, common-good or community-led control of land in the UK. These alternative forms of ownership and control have become particularly important in the 21st century.

From green spaces that nurture health and wellbeing, to community centres capable of generating sustainable income streams, communities are taking over and running formerly public places and spaces on their own terms.

Drawing together examples of Big Local areas that have found new ways to bring land and other assets into community control, Hannah Gardiner from Shared Assets lays out how funders and policy makers could do more to help others follow in their footsteps.

## About Shared Assets

At Shared Assets we make land work for everyone. We support the development of new models of managing land that are sustainable and productive, create livelihoods, enhance the environment, and involve local people in making decisions about the places they care about.

## About Local Trust

Local Trust was established in 2012 to deliver Big Local, a unique programme that puts residents across the country in control of decisions about their own lives and neighbourhoods. Funded by a £200m endowment from the Big Lottery Fund - the largest ever single commitment of lottery funds - Big Local provides in excess of £1m of long-term funding over 10-15 years to each of 150 local communities, many of which face major social and economic challenges but have missed out on statutory and lottery funding in the past.

**Local Trust**

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