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people



**'I don't think anybody
realised that they had the
power to change anything'**

The relationship between money
and community power in the
Big Local programme

September 2024

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Local Trust

About this report

The Big Local programme provided £1.15 million in non-prescriptive funding to 150 communities across England. The programme differs fundamentally from previous initiatives by avoiding the traditional route of channelling funds through local authorities. Due to the few restrictions on how the funding can be used, communities are able to decide their own priorities and pace of progress over 10-15 years.

This research presents the risks, challenges and opportunities experienced by Big Local areas when trying to use their £1.15 million of funding to grow community power. It highlights a web of interrelated components that explains how non-prescriptive financial resources can generate and sustain community power. No one component on its own can support the transfer of power, rather there needs to be a systematic and ongoing effort to construct, maintain and strengthen the web and its connections.

Understanding what these components are, how they were supported or restricted, and how they can be further facilitated in the future will have implications for policymakers, funders and designers of place-based programmes as well as highlighting the value of community-led, non-prescriptive funding.

Authorship and acknowledgements

This report was written by Dr. Kim Ozano, Sarah Glover and Beatrice Egid with contributions from Motto Nganda and Carrie Barrett, based on interviews, observations, participatory workshops and desk-based research carried out by the authors.

SCL Agency Ltd has found great value in collaborating with Big Local partnerships exploring the relationship between power and money. These partnerships offered diverse perspectives and experiences rooted in their community contexts, enriching our understanding of how funding impacts community empowerment.

Thank you to all the partnerships and residents who hosted the workshops and made us feel welcome – you are inspirational! We appreciate your time and expertise in assessing power and finding space at a busy time in the programme to take part in the research. The drawing and creative skills of all participants were exceptional and helped us gain a deeper understanding of the daily realities faced by partnerships, volunteers and residents.

Thank you to Laura, Lisa-Marie, Lucy and Jayne at Local Trust for commissioning us and directing the research. Engaging with Big Local partnerships has provided invaluable insights, fostering a collaborative learning environment that has enhanced the depth and relevance of our research findings which we have both enjoyed exploring and will take forward into future projects.

How to reference this report

Ozano, K., Egid, B., Nganda, M., Barrett, C. and Glover, S. (2024) The relationship between money and community power. London: Local Trust and The SCL Agency Ltd

DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.29822300

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Front cover: Thurrock Pride Festival, June 2024
Photo: Local Trust/Mark Massey



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Introduction

Introduction

Big Local is a 10-15-year, resident-led programme running from 2012-2026 that seeks to build capacity within disadvantaged communities by transferring decision-making power, and control over a financial resource, directly to residents. Central to the programme is that resident-led groups (Big Local partnerships)¹ in 150 geographic communities (Big Local areas) each control over £1.15m in non-prescriptive funding to use as they see fit to make their areas better places to live.

The programme differs from previous community and regeneration initiatives in that the funding is transferred directly to communities, as opposed to being channelled through local authorities or community organisations. A separate organisation (chosen by the resident-led groups rather than the funder) known as a locally trusted organisation (LTO) holds and manages the funding on their behalf. Further, the funding has few restrictions on how it can be used, with communities deciding on their own priorities, the activity to meet them, and their pace of progress within the long-term timeframe of 10-15 years.

The money is intended to be a source of power for under-resourced communities within the programme, enabling them to address power imbalances with other local stakeholders and control their

financial resources to meet community needs. However, because the money was unlikely to create change on its own, it has been accompanied by a programme with minimal bureaucracy, a patient and non-judgemental funder, and flexible and comprehensive support to build residents' confidence to spend it.

Evidence from the programme suggests that money is both a source of power and an enabler of further power for the Big Local areas. For example, it can:

- act as a catalyst for community power
- enable community decision making
- build residents' capacity and ability to meet community needs
- enable the facilitation of collaborations and the development of shared goals with stakeholders.

¹ A Big Local partnership is a group comprising at least eight people ('members') that guide the overall direction of a Big Local area.

What this report seeks to understand

Following on from an initial exploration (Local Trust, 2022b), Local Trust commissioned the SCL Agency to investigate the relationship between the money and community power within the Big Local programme. The main research question was: “To what extent is the money a source, and enabler, of community power in Big Local areas?”. This research also considers the following questions:

- How does the relationship between money and community power change over time? And what does it mean for community power when the Big Local funding is spent?
- How do different community contexts affect or alter the relationships between money and community power?
- How is the money experienced and perceived by residents in Big Local areas?
- What are the other sources of power that may exist in communities that have been historically under-resourced or ‘left-behind’²?
- What are the risks and rewards that Big Local partnerships must navigate when in receipt of the funding?

² Areas that have not historically received a fair share of investment available and therefore have lacked the services and facilities that help connect people in a community, as defined in a report by Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion and Local Trust (2019).

What is power?

Power functions at different levels in society and is always shifting and altering around us as time passes and the world changes. An analysis framework called the 'Social ecology of power' (appendix 1) was useful for thinking about power and ensuring it was examined at all levels of society (Roura, 2021). This framework, originating from research on community participation and inclusion, is explored below.

So, what are the levels of power?

The **micro** level: We each have power as individuals, which comes from who we are, our background, education, life experiences and more. Even if we don't see this power, it is there. This power is influenced by our relationships with other people and groups of people, who in turn have their own power, which can impact on our ability to use our own.

The **meso** level: Power is also held and exerted by the organisations we interact with, such as government bodies, public service providers, charities or businesses. These organisations sometimes support power in communities, or they can restrict it, depending on their values, beliefs and practices. Around us every day, there are also changing environmental and contextual conditions where we live, work, and play which impact on power. For example, living in an urban or rural area, climate changes or pandemics! These can quickly change power dynamics.

The **macro** level: Finally, power is exerted on our lives as individuals, communities and organisations by political and social structures. These include political decisions, public policies, social expectations, historical decisions, and distribution of resources.

Power at each of these levels is impacted by access and freedom to use resources, such as Big Local funding. The framework serves as a functional tool with which to examine the relationship between money and power dynamics thoroughly and systematically.

Several other perspectives and definitions of power have been interpreted in Big Local and beyond. Discussing power terminology with Big Local areas to exchange understandings helps to analyse power in a way that has meaning for both research and Big Local communities. For example, in some Big Local areas, the word 'power' is not – and has not been – a well-liked term, compared with terms like 'community agency'. Likewise, when it came to discussing Big Local money, some preferred the term 'investment' to 'spending', feeling this to be a better reflection of how they saw the funding. We took these preferences into account when collecting and analysing data.

Local Trust literature has explored and defined 'power' in different ways. For example, one report conceived of it as an individual or group with some form of control or influence over another individual or group (Local Trust, 2018); another, in terms of three dimensions ³: "power to, power within, power with" (Local Trust, 2018; see also: Popay et al., 2020). However it is defined, factors reported to help power grow have included having opportunities for active decision-making, implementing initiatives and services, collaborating with others, building community assets and capacity, and receiving support to use community skills and knowledge (Pollard et al., 2021).

Existing research on the topic has found that outcomes of community power have included individuals gaining self-worth, autonomy, and perceived control over decisions and actions in their daily lives (Zimmerman, 2000), as well as strengthened community resilience and the development of capabilities required to exercise collective control over decisions and actions impacting people's lives (Pollard et al., 2021).

³ As developed through the longitudinal research study of the Big Local programme, Communities in Control (Popay et al. 2020), "power 'to' is important for the capacity to act; to exercise agency and to realise the potential of rights, citizenship, or voice. Power 'within' often refers to gaining the sense of self-identity, confidence and awareness that is a precondition for action. Power 'with' refers to the synergy which can emerge through partnerships and collaboration with others, or through processes of collective action and alliance building," (Local Trust, 2018).

Research approach

Our research took a phased case-study approach, using qualitative interviews and participatory methods to maximise participation from Big Local stakeholders.

In phase 1, four Big Local case study areas (see appendix 2) were identified with varying demographics, geography, and speed at which they had spent their Big Local funding to date.

In phase 2, we conducted a literature review of existing Local Trust research to build a picture of how community power had been discussed in other studies and reflection pieces. This review informed interview guides and participatory research tools.

In phase 3, we conducted 13 online interviews with stakeholders across the case study areas to understand context, partnership characteristics, and the journey to achievements.

In phase 4, we used findings from the interviews as discussion points in participatory workshops. The workshops utilised the 'river of life' and 'ripple effect mapping' methods (see appendices 3 and 4 for details), and were conducted both in person and online, to reflect visually and creatively on Big Local journeys and capture impacts collaboratively. Finally, we conducted validation interviews with two *Our Bigger Story*⁴ researchers, whose vast experience and learning from working across 15 Big Local areas since 2015 ensured that themes developed through the previous phases were reflective of the wider Big Local experience.

⁴ Our Bigger Story is a multimedia evaluation of 15 Big Local areas that aims to record positive change in Big Local areas and understand how those changes come about and how they can be sustained. It is led by the Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC) at the University of Birmingham.

The journey from non-prescriptive funding to community empowerment

Our research identified that the extent to which Big Local money has been a source and enabler of community power in Big Local areas has been impacted by the presence or absence of several key components (listed below). These components were linked together in a web of infrastructure and relationships through which community power could grow, flourish, and be sustained.

No one component on its own supported the transfer of power; rather, there needed to be a systematic and ongoing effort to construct, maintain, and expand the web while continuously cultivating each component. These components (highlighted in bold in Figure 1 below) show how access to, and spending of, non-prescriptive funding can lead to community power. They are discussed in more detail within this report.

In this report we present the journey from non-prescriptive funding to community empowerment as found in our research, highlighting how the funding supported the development of community power, what we refer to as the five 'enablers' to power that arose through investing and spending the money, and the relationship between money and power over time. Within these sections, we discuss the influence of context on the relationship between money and power; the risks and rewards that Big Local partnerships have navigated while in receipt of the funding; and the changing relationship between money and community power over time.

Figure 1. Web of community power



This diagram – and in particular the key components (in bold) – shows how access to, and spending of, non-prescriptive funding, such as through the Big Local programme, can lead to and develop community power. These components are discussed in more detail within this report.

In what ways does money support community power?

The following sections focus on the nuanced ways through which the financial autonomy of non-prescriptive funding not only uncovers and challenges existing power structures but also strengthens the community's capability for leadership, strategic decision-making, and sustained influence. We examine the essential roles that skill development, strategic partnerships, and investment in external expertise played, and show that Big Local money has been invaluable for catalysing community-led actions, navigating power dynamics, and fostering transformative community-led change.

Exposing community power structures

Summary

When residents have control of money, existing structural power imbalances are made visible and become negotiable.

Having money created novel opportunities for residents to develop awareness of the historical, social, and political structures of power that can limit resident-led action and decision-making. This awareness was a complex interplay between residents, powerholders, stakeholders, expectations, and context.

- Some powerholders fought for control of the money, perceiving themselves as 'experts' in allocating funding rather than necessarily in support of the development of community leadership. This distracted from the programme's underpinning concept of catalysing resident-led power.
- Powerholders' willingness to let go of control significantly impacted the ability of partnerships to advance their own power.
- Examining representation and diversity in partnerships and their activities highlighted some inequities in diversity and representation, which could be acted upon using Big Local funding.
- In-depth understanding of community expectations and historical relationships with funding has been instrumental in shaping how Big Local partnerships spent their funding to foster trust and buy-in from their community.
- Residents developed the necessary skills to navigate existing contextual power dynamics in the community – such as negotiation, conflict management, consensus building, and resolution – early on.

These points show that having money and engaging in conflicts (through dialogue with powerholders and residents) has been critical for partnerships in building a web of community power, both early on and throughout their Big Local journey. However, in areas in which an especially significant number of barriers to community power existed, partnership members tended to become fatigued, risking apathy developing towards community-led funding opportunities.

As the four partnerships involved in our research developed, they encountered early power-related challenges with local organisations, public bodies, and some community members. These tended to be caused by existing powerholders seeing themselves as authorities on funding and wanting to benefit by spending it as they saw fit, or by scepticism among some local residents of the value of community-led funding – often as a result of previous experience of and expectations around it.

 **... Before Big Local, you'd get promised money, and then after six months: 'You've had your time with that money, now we need to take it away from you again.' And that's why the whole community were very sceptical at the beginning. So, when Big Local came and we were told that this is our money, we spend it as we want, on what we want. People didn't believe that... it was like, the only people who could do anything were people like the local council and the NHS, social services, they're the only ones that could make a difference to anything. And that took a bit... to get over to people."**

(Area 2, river of life workshop)

In some cases, powerholders argued for control from a perceived position of expertise in assigning funding, rather than desire to support capacity and opportunity for resident-led growth. While some of their ideas about how to spend the money may not have been detrimental to communities per se, they did distract from the programme's underpinning principle of catalysing resident-led power, and often delayed the development of spending plans.

 **... right at the beginning... there was a lot of jockeying from people for power and influence..."**

(Area 4, interview with LTO)

 **... at the beginning, it was always statutory organisations that got all the clout, who decided what was done with everything."**

(Area 2, river of life workshop)

Local authorities were key powerholders, and their openness to the ethos of Big Local is and has been often critical for communities to exercise power.

 **... it's nothing against (Big Local partnership), this happens with any organisation trying to work with (named council) or (named county) Council – they are just closed doors, they're not interested."**

(Area 3, river of life workshop)

In this research, one partnership referred to council officers who didn't believe in resident power as the "old guard", and those who believed that residents could make change when presented with money and opportunity as the "new guard". The same partnership believed that both old and new existed within local authorities, and that power lay in making links with the so-called new guard who could advocate for the community and open doors for resident leadership to flourish.

Research on Big Local from Baker et al. (2022) emphasises the importance of building multiple relationships between the community and different departments and levels of authority within local authorities. Their research demonstrates the importance of accepting historical disagreements on both sides and working together, which they found has been more effective than ignoring them. However, they also found that, despite local authorities' willingness to support community-led action, their infrastructure often does not align with how communities tend to approach making change. These mismatches can limit the potential for communities to work with public agencies, and reinforce the perception within public agencies of resident-led groups being unskilled or lacking understanding. Such perceptions sometimes affected the power balance and outcomes of relationships between Big Local areas and public agencies (Baker et al., 2022).

These dynamics affected the willingness of some powerholders to let go of control (and with that some privileges), which significantly impacted some partnerships' ability to advance power.

 **... so much time and energy was wasted. The whole thinking was it would be resident-led and that these organisations like councils and those people would support it, rather than try to take it over."**

(Area 3, river of life workshop)

Often, however, where strong relationships were established between residents and local authorities, opportunities for community control were created, and joint working succeeded for the benefit of residents. For example, in some Big Local areas, residents were invited to their council's strategic planning meetings and their suggestions written into their economic strategies. And in many areas, where tensions between residents and councils existed at the start, relationships between both sides often changed for the better over time – indicating a clear advantage of the longer timeframe of the Big Local programme.

 **There wasn't a lot of council engagement in the beginning. Now the council come to us to run their events... we've got a lot of contacts in the community and now we work in partnership with them..."**

(Area 1, interview with partnership member)

However, notably, where these relationships remained strained many years into the Big Local programme, our research found there tended to be little evidence of an empowered community.

Local Trust offered advice, networking, and learning support to help Big Local areas set up and manage challenges along the way, which has been reported as beneficial both by the partnerships involved in our research and in other research (Wilson et al., 2023). However, some participants in our research suggested that Local Trust could have played a more supportive role (such as by priming local authorities directly) in facilitating these difficult conversations with powerholders to pave the way for communities to take control at the start of the programme.

However, it is worth considering that, had Local Trust pre-emptively led conversations with powerholders, residents could have missed out on valuable exposure to power structures and consequently not developed the necessary skills to see, understand, and navigate the existing contextual power dynamics in their community. As one area put it:

"We went to council meetings, and when they were speaking to us in professional words, we would just stand up and say, 'excuse me, can you please explain it in English that we understand', because that was how they were getting away with things. So now we have a voice at last in big things, they've all started to realise we're not stupid, because that's how everybody made us feel... We knew what we were talking about because we are living it, day in, day out, and this is where we get the better of everybody because they can come and say, 'Oh, you need this, you need that', and we just say, 'No, we don't!'" (Area 2, river of life workshop)

The non-prescriptive way Big Local money was given was a catalyst for these early difficult conversations, and in local powerholders being challenged by communities to relinquish control or demonstrate their commitment to shared decision-making. At such points, residents began to understand and invest in the leadership skills that would be needed for their communities to gain power – such as negotiation, conflict management, consensus building, and resolution.

Establishing stable Big Local partnerships allowed for reflection on doubts about the community's ability to lead and explore ways to overcome scepticism regarding the transformative potential of funds. However, this was challenging in some areas, with one partnership taking half of the Big Local timeframe to stabilise as a group. Another area limited powerholders' engagement in

Big Local to prioritise resident leadership, inadvertently signalling to powerholders that their contributions were unnecessary, potentially affecting the dynamics of resident-led power in that area.

Ongoing issues, such as unstable Big Local partnerships or internal or external conflicts, also deterred wider community engagement and trust in Big Local efforts. Continual struggles like these left some members too drained to persist, risking a cycle of disempowerment contrary to Big Local's goals.

Diversity and representation were also significant factors in local power dynamics for partnerships. Control over funds enabled some areas to see, and in some cases address, local inequities in power, such as a lack of ethnic diversity or youth engagement. Some partnerships also used funds to identify and reduce isolation in communities, bringing in previously excluded groups and adjusting approaches to include those with engagement barriers such as cultural differences, demanding shift work patterns, or childcare responsibilities. From here, efforts were made to increase engagement with these demographics and increase their access to decision-making spaces.



...people in the communities around here, we've got so many different nationalities, different languages, they need to be confident, you know. English might not be their first language, but they start to come along and they get involved, and I think building their confidence and giving them opportunities to, to learn a skill, and then run their own events as well and that can help them build more to work in the future as well."

(Area 1, interview with partnership member)

As identified in other studies, Local Trust sometimes used its position as a funder to promote learning and self-reflection on equality, diversity and inclusion among Big Local partnerships which would further strengthen community power. Its learning and development opportunities and support structures provided important resources that Big Local partnership members could draw on, however these were not utilised equally by the partnerships involved in our research. (Afridi et al., 2021).

Once partnerships felt they had ownership of the Big Local funding and some level of stability, they could decide how to spend the money. Recognising the diverse skills within, they often also identified the need for external expertise to realise their visions. This investment in expertise brought both advantages and challenges to amplifying community power, as discussed below.

Strengthening community capacity

Summary

Money strengthens community capacity and power through investing in external support and learning by spending.

The transfer of power to residents is dependent upon their development and distribution of collective skills, knowledge and expertise, which they strengthened in different and multiple ways.

- Residents' personal assets were built upon through learning by doing, making decisions about how to spend the money, attending training or buying in the necessary expertise to learn from.
- Paid workers played an enabling role when they built the skills and capacity of other partnership and community members.
- Commissioned experts supported partnerships and residents to implement projects, build community capacity and secure sustainability within their vision of change.
- Commissioning external support freed up residents' time to spend on other, equally important, ways to increase community power.

External experts needed to be aware of their power and privilege and take measures to avoid overshadowing resident-led initiatives with their influence. Communities tended to enhance their strength by recognising their limitations and effectively utilising funds to engage necessary support.

One mechanism used by Big Local partnerships to strengthen their capacity and capabilities (and sometimes those of their fellow community members) has been to fund paid workers for specific roles. In some cases, this has been integral to growing lasting community power.



We became much more visible, I believe, when we had (paid workers) in place, we were much more proactive at local events, (publicising) what (the partnership) was about, pulling together our social media so that people could see what was happening.”

(Area 4, river of life workshop)

However, this has not always been the case. Big Local literature reported that in some cases paid workers became the face of Big Local to the community, meaning they held the power rather than the partnership or community. In such cases, this impeded trust in the partnership from communities and local powerholders and stakeholders (Local Trust, 2022a).

Nonetheless, in our research, paid workers were often reported to support the development of power in the background. These workers were seen by partnerships as valued and trusted partners who provided them the necessary skills and expertise to grow power, and were even depicted in drawings by one young partnership member in a workshop as superheroes. For example, through funding additional support from paid workers, partnerships were able to ensure they had resource to increase participation from young people, bring in significant additional funding, build sustainable new organisations or groups in the community, and move projects forward. In one area, a large portion of Big Local money was spent on external experts, who wrote most of the bids that together brought in over £2 million in additional funding for Big Local projects – something residents felt empowered by as a measure of their own success.

Although this approach could be seen as a missed opportunity for residents in terms of bid-writing experience, it may also reflect the capacity of residents to engage with the complex processes involved. Using Big Local funding to employ these experts meant that power was still being shifted to the community because residents retained ownership and influence on the agenda and proposals surrounding the bids. Moreover, their capacity to handle funding applications still developed through collaboration with the experts. The approach also freed up residents' time to spend on other equally important ways to increase community power, such as being involved in resident networks, identifying community needs, and delivering varied activities in the community.



(The ideas involved in bids) very much came from the community and the plans were shared. They didn't particularly write (the bids), but certainly everything that went into them was what they'd come up with and it was shared with them, and they were happy with that.”

(Area 2, interview with LTO)

However, some paid workers or external experts fitted in better with their areas than others, with many partnerships reporting that having the right skills, values, and approach to working with residents and partnerships has been important for external support to be effective and strengthen community power. One area described how they initially did not want to spend money on paid workers, but that over time they saw the value in having support to spend and implement their plans.

Similarly, partnerships paid consultants to support the development of wider community groups and individuals to strengthen their capacity and sustainability. For example, wanting to provide more than just financial support for small or informal local resident-led community groups or freelancers, many areas commissioned support to help them move their work forward. Some partnerships also commissioned experts on business support to help groups to become established organisations. This resulted in new start-ups, community interest companies (CICs), charitable incorporated organisations (CIOs), and other organisations through which community power and influence could flourish.

 **(Commissioned experts) supported those groups to then apply for other funding so as to not keep coming back to Big Local, to generate it from elsewhere..."**

(Area 2, river of life workshop).

In one area, a task-and-finish group (a temporary team focused on completing a specific task) model was chosen to engage residents in leading and running larger projects. However, they soon identified that support from an expert with knowledge of setting up and running projects would be needed to help the resident groups implement projects that would become sustainable after the groups were disbanded. The partnership used Big Local money to commission an expert, which participants saw as vital to realising project objectives – in this case, managing and running the local village hall.

 **I would say that one of the shifts that happened with the village hall is that the people there were probably not very experienced in understanding what exactly was required to run a charity and run a building and through the input of (a commissioned expert), they become much more experienced..."**

(Area 4, river of life workshop)

Therefore, it could be argued that a community's power also lies in their ability to understand their limitations and address them by buying in support. Consequently, the division of labour within and beyond partnerships is also a skill that can enable or restrict power development.

However, it is also imperative to fully understand and monitor the intentions and motivations of paid workers, consultants, and experts to ensure that they empower partnerships rather than extract power for their own benefit. External experts should also be conscious of their power and privilege in relation to the communities they work with, and take steps to mitigate any direct or indirect power gains that distract from resident-led power. Understanding and guiding the influence of paid workers and experts is crucial to ensuring they enhance rather than undermine community empowerment. This vigilance is necessary to maintain the balance of power and to focus on the genuine advancement of community goals.

In addition to external support, other examples of how access to financial resources has been pivotal in cultivating community power are discussed in the following section. This includes establishing a unique community identity, developing physical assets as bases of action, fostering strong resident networks, and supporting diverse activities. These elements are foundational for creating a community-led infrastructure that empowers residents, facilitates effective

relationships with powerholders, and amplifies the voice and influence of communities. When investments were strategically directed towards these enablers, communities not only gained control over resource distribution, but they also presented a compelling case for funders to invest in community-led initiatives, reinforcing the cycle of resident-led decision-making and sustainable power dynamics.

What enables money to develop community power?

Big Local areas involved in our research were able to evidence community influence and power within powerful institutions, and a level of control and decision-making over the local distribution of resources. These areas told a story about how the money has been – and still is being – used to create what we refer to as ‘enablers’ of community power. These included a distinct community identity, physical assets that served as bases for community action, strong and connected networks of residents and organisations, and varied activities.

These enablers line up with findings from other Local Trust studies, highlighting that community empowerment can grow through creating community-led infrastructure. This involves a broad range of actions, including exploring and grasping community needs, welcoming diverse perspectives, pinpointing key action areas, fostering leadership, and enhancing collaboration among groups. When pursued well, Wilson et al. (2022a) highlights that:



... community-led infrastructure can result in resident-led structures, connected networks of residents, effective relationships with agencies and strengthened resident voice and influence...”

(Wilson et al., 2022a p2.).

Our research showed that when Big Local areas used money to establish these enablers they developed an attractive community-led offer for funders, decision-makers, and other powerholders, acting as a conduit to resident-led decision-making and influence on the resources affecting their lives. The unique, informal, yet strategic nature of these enablers promoted belief and confidence in resident-led action for both residents and stakeholders. Big Local money has been used to strengthen the web of community power through five main enablers on which community power could grow, flourish, and be sustained, which are discussed in detail in this section.

A distinct community identity

Summary

Investing in the development of a distinct and visible community identity makes resident-led power visible and connected.

Partnerships forged distinct community identities in several ways:

- Developing unique names, logos, branding, and websites.
- Effectively communicating Big Local values at local events.
- Creating effective and connected communications.
- Investing in branded clothing, banners, posters, consultation and awareness-raising events, and a social media presence.
- Commissioning professionals with specialised knowledge and expertise in communications, branding, public relations and marketing activities.

By creating a positive community identity, partnerships were able to attract and engage more community members, raise the awareness of Big Local, strengthen connections between fractured communities, and visibly demonstrate the value of connected and active residents to outside organisations. They were also able to provide opportunities for residents to hold them accountable as partnerships. All these were steps towards community empowerment.

Before Big Local began, some partnerships and residents felt their areas lacked a sense of community identity. This was generally thought to limit the ability of communities to take collective action and use their power to influence change, and Big Local money has therefore often been used to create a new, strengthened community identity.

Fractured communities, previously unconnected – occasionally oppositional – were united through having a joint identity and actions. For example, in one area, a robust joint community identity across two estates promoted equality and recognition for contributions, creating a cohesive and empowered environment.



I've lived on the estates all my life and I hadn't really seen any community groups that I felt were really inclusive – everything lacked identity. There was lack of community spirit, lack of engagement. So I think we created an identity... people got to know each other a lot more. It's got more of a family feel to it... there is a sense of togetherness, a sense of being able to listen to ideas and make a change..."

(Area 1, interview with partnership member)



... I would say now, 10 years later, we work together very well. We support projects (the community centre on the other estate) are doing, they support ours... We try not to compete or duplicate within our community centres, we try and complement. So, all of the community centres within our area now have a different strength."

(Area 2, interview with LTO)

Through building a community identity, this enabled Big Local areas to snowball their community engagement, engaging residents in their activities by creating an identifiable brand in their area that demonstrated the power of a unified community.

 **... if you go litter-picking, you get a yellow t-shirt with the branding on it. They see a yellow t-shirt and they know, oh, well, that's someone from (named) Big Local."**

(Area 1, interview with partnership member)

Having a recognisable brand identity also gave residents the confidence to speak and advocate for change, knowing they were backed up by a known and valued community authority. Where this occurred it often resulted in residents being invited to speak in decision-making spaces, giving power and strength to the community voice. For example, young people from one Big Local area who developed a film club were invited to speak in parliament about issues affecting them, which was facilitated by their local MP.

Communication about Big Local activities has been and still is a key mechanism for strengthening links and connecting communities in Big Local areas.

 **When we had this community newsletter, more people realised that (the money) was real and they could apply for money, and they could see things that people had applied for and got the money for."**

(Area 4, river of life workshop)

Those who did not invest in creating and connecting resident-led actions with a strong identity struggled to communicate the power of the money or the opportunities it could offer to the community or powerholders. For example, investments in CCTV or street lighting improved community safety, but without community branding or a communication strategy that showed it was resident-led action, residents did not realise positive changes were the result of Big Local funding. Partnerships that did not invest initially in marketing activities identified this as a gap later on in the Big Local timeline and were still working to achieve increased visibility of the partnership at the time of data collection.

 **Residents didn't know we existed. Basically, we had a job trying to get (awareness of the partnership) out there... It was mid-pandemic before you actually started to see the community understanding the identity of the (named Big Local partnership). There was a huge struggle up until that point around actually getting the community to accept the identity of who we were and what we did."**

(Area 4, river of life workshop)

However, our research showed caution to be important when generating an identity. In some contexts, a partnership's social media presence created spaces for bad-faith critique and unconstructive comments, especially where partnerships experienced tensions with community groups or powerholders who had envisioned the money being used in a different way.

In areas where many residents lack access to or skills to confidently navigate the internet, digital communications also needed to be balanced with printed media and distributed in well-used local spaces.



... what we decided to do was not only to produce a newsletter, but invest in a local delivery guy to put a copy of that newsletter through every residential letterbox in the Big Local area... People could see what the Big Local partnership had done... And that actually was a power shift as well.”

(Area 4, river of life workshop)

Physical assets as bases of community action

Summary

Financing physical assets serves as a base for community action, enabling connectedness and collective power to grow.

This research and previous Big Local studies have identified the value of investing in physical and green spaces as opportunities for community action and power, through either the creation or upgrade of community hubs, play parks, green spaces and more (Wilson et al., 2022b). Our research found that Big Local funding supported the development of these assets, which in turn enabled community power to grow by:

- providing informal, relaxed spaces for residents to meet, plan, consult, share community needs, and run activities responding to those needs
- having a visible presence in communities where stakeholders and residents could demonstrate the valuable outcomes of resident-led action
- preventing closure of community buildings, which could potentially limit spaces where community groups could operate and connect
- reducing operating costs for small groups and organisations, such as heating and electric through green energy.

In a time of austerity and closure of local resources, investing in physical assets was critical to demonstrate the power of money to work for the benefit of communities, providing physical spaces where they could connect, inspire, and unite.

Big Local areas shared the value of establishing physical assets as bases for engagement, consultation, and community action. For example, Big Local funding has been used to back up asset transfer applications, upgrade existing assets, or rent spaces that served as community hubs necessary to grow community power.

 **Without that physical space, things would've been a lot harder... I think with all the organisations (running in the area), you'll realise that most places need that physical (space) as well as everything else."**

(Area 2 interview with partnership member)

Physical assets offered residents invaluable places to meet, plan, and be visible in their communities. In areas where funding went towards improvements to assets like village halls, awareness grew of Big Local funding, encouraging small groups making use of those spaces to seek their own grants from the partnership.

 **Once the village halls started to get funding to improve their surroundings, the groups using those facilities began applying for funding as well."**

(Area 3 river of life workshop)

The backdrop in England of austerity and rising living costs meant that many community venues and their groups were at risk of closure during the time of the Big Local programme. This also compelled partnerships to use their funding to strengthen local facilities and support the groups using them to prevent them from disappearing.

 **... without Big Local money we couldn't have saved this place, because it was ready for closure. It enabled us to keep a meeting place, so the community could still come in and speak to us."**

(Area 2, interview with partnership member)

One area found innovative ways to financially sustain resident actions and activities in their community hub – for example, through donations and small contributions from residents, they could run a subsidised food shop, charity shop, and café, all of which were self-sustaining.

 **...the cafe completely supported itself and generated a little bit of money back into the centre... it was completely self-sufficient as an income stream."**

(Area 2, river of life workshop)

Further, by investing in mechanisms to reduce bills (such as efficient or green utilities and repairs) in community venues, asset owners could pass on the savings to community groups, who could then afford to continue to operate.

 **...venue managers could then either use their reserves for other important building improvements, or they could freeze their hourly rate, making them accessible to everybody – because at the time, everything was skyrocketing."**

(Area 3, river of life workshop)

For some partnerships, access to community space is important for achieving an informal, relaxed approach to engaging residents in decision-making, understanding what their needs were, and running activities that responding to those needs. The busy atmosphere in these spaces facilitated informal conversation, and meant that when residents were exposed to new ideas, their feedback could be gathered quickly and easily. Local people also tended to talk with each other and generate ideas for the community when they came together in these spaces.

Some partnerships had a long-term vision of how community assets would enable the transfer of power to communities. However, for other areas it has been a more organic process that grew out of giving grants.



I don't think anybody realised that they had the power to change anything. Nobody sat down and said, 'Oh, let's fund all the community halls in the area, and then it will improve people's lives'. That was never stated. But as you get further down the river... You kind of realise that's what's happened."

(Area 3, river of life workshop)

Empowered and responsive resident networks

Summary

Investing in resilient, empowered, and responsive resident networks encourages distributed leadership, amplifying the power of a collective community voice.

'Resident networks' (as described by Big Local areas) consist of residents (paid or voluntary) who are actively and implicitly involved with Big Local – including volunteers, activists, group or activity leaders, employees within community assets, residents who contribute to ideas and decision-making, associated community organisations and small groups, and partnership members. The transfer of power to communities can be seen when money is used to establish and strengthen resident networks by:

- creating informal opportunities – to contribute ideas, share decision-making, develop social and cultural capital, and to learn and hold partnerships accountable
- offering training, mentorship, and support in leadership, advocacy, public speaking, and other skills – opening up new opportunities for residents to exercise power
- investing in reward systems to recognise resident contributions and keep residents engaged and active
- presenting in-depth, meaningful engagement and consultation opportunities that were responsive to ever-changing community needs – positioning communities as unique and powerful community mobilisers.

When money is invested in resident networks, residents have more opportunities to shape the decisions that affected them, access additional funding for their needs, gain employment or volunteering roles, and establish influential relationships with powerholders.

The research in this paper, and other research carried out by Local Trust, found that Big Local areas connected residents through both shared interests and collective action to meet the needs of the community. In combination, this nurtured a wide pool of active and connected residents set up for sustained collaborative work, and created skilled and confident communities that were invested in future generations as potential community leaders (Wilson et al., 2022b).

Establishing resident networks often involved presenting informal opportunities where residents could build confidence to share ideas, take part in decision-making, and hold partnerships accountable.

 **Inviting residents to join board meetings, and making the meetings themselves fun, open, informal spaces increased the confidence of residents to share their views and ask for change. This also helped residents hold the partnership board to account in terms of the changes they promised to make."**

(Area 1, interview with resident)

When these opportunities were more relaxed and open, residents seemed more likely to take part, as they were deemed safe spaces in which to contribute and learn. As they developed skills, partnership members and seasoned volunteers taught and mentored others involved in the network, thus growing community capacity. For example, volunteers who became experienced in public speaking mentored others and presented opportunities for them to increase their confidence to speak out and demand change.

 **We made sure that if any of our volunteers went to a (public agency) meeting or anything like that, we sort of told them, don't stand in the back row – get your voice out there, because that's what makes the decision-makers take notice of you."**

(Area 2, interview with partnership chair)

One resident who transitioned from accessing support services offered by Big Local to being an advocate spoke about how she felt more empowered as a result.

 **I ain't no mouse no more – I'm a tiger, I'm roaring, I want to be heard. People out there need to be heard."**

(Area 2, interview with resident)

To further strengthen resident networks, money has been spent on developing social and cultural capital and on award systems to keep residents inspired, engaged, and invested in Big Local.

 **Investing in awards and celebrations of community members' achievements was seen as an important investment in increasing a sense of belonging and helping community members feel valued."**

(Area 1, river of life workshop)

When power shifts have taken place, it has often been related to residents having come together to demand change or gain ownership of assets or decisions affecting them. With each such success, residents' confidence in their ability to advocate with and on behalf of the community would grow. For example, in one area, a group of 10 community members attended a council meeting to ask for an asset transfer of a community building that faced being torn down and removed from community use. Knowing they had access to Big Local money gave the residents confidence to come together and take action; it then further supported the asset transfer by paying for legal fees and solicitors, restoration, and capacity support.



We told (the council), they've taken one (community) building off us (prior to Big Local funding), they're not going to take this one... We knew we could back our words up because we knew there was (Big Local) money about to come."

(Area 2, river of life workshop)

Having access to the wider community through resident networks also allowed for more meaningful and sustained engagement and consultation about spending. On the other hand, without investment in local networks, engaging residents in decisions about how to spend the money often became a struggle for Big Local partnerships. In such cases, spending decisions tended to be made by a few individuals on the partnership, which although efficient, could restrict opportunities for building collective and distributed power.

As highlighted in other research, distributed leadership is a process, not a person; it is a collective action wherein each individual is empowered through a role on which they lead, and which they can fulfil with purpose, confidence, and authority (Terry et al., 2023, Goulden, 2022). Goulden (2022) states that "a community exercising distributed leadership will see many different people – whether out in front, out back, introverted or extroverted – influence and lead change in multiple different ways" (p.12).

In Big Local areas, once resident networks were established and sustained, the money has quickly and efficiently been used to strengthen resilience and responsiveness to community needs. This was clearly evidenced when resident networks responded to crises, such as COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis.



Money and power actually has allowed us to be agile. Without lots of bureaucracy and red tape, we would not be able to do lots of stuff."

(Area 1, interview with partnership member)

Resident networks in Big Local have been made up of people who have also been affected by these crises and knew what was needed without extensive consultation. Access to non-prescriptive funds enabled Big Local partnerships to allocate or reallocate funds towards these resident networks for quick action without navigating funder requirements. This strengthened the power of communities to manage their own challenges in ways that they deemed appropriate, demonstrating to funders and powerholders that resident networks had the power to be responsive and resilient in times of crisis. This insight unlocked further funding opportunities and avenues for community power.

COVID-19 changed everything... Even (if) you'd (previously) got the money coming in, and secured a building, and got councillors on your side and everything, (COVID-19) was where the recognition started to come in."

(Area 2, river of life workshop)

On the other hand, without access to funds that could be spent quickly, partnerships would have been restricted in their capacity to respond to urgent needs in their community. This could have negatively impacted the trust and belief in resident-led change for both residents and powerholders. The ability to be responsive set the Big Local partnerships and resident networks apart from other organisations.

In lockdown, we set up and running within days a food bank at the local school. The council also did that, but they were 10 steps behind."

(Area 1, interview with partnership member)

Partnership members from one area spoke about the power of being able to reach communities in ways that other services and organisations could not; so much so that local NHS services started asking them for advice on how to reach local communities.

... an NHS committee spent hours and hours and hours thinking 'how do we reach them? How do we get on the doorsteps?' I think because this is community-driven, we've been nearer to residents' doorsteps than any of the strategic agencies."

(Area 3, river of life workshop)

These findings echo research conducted by Local Trust on community responses to COVID-19 that found that "well-established community-led infrastructure – that is, networks of residents, community leadership, trust, relationships with agencies, and access to money – can make for an effective community response to COVID-19" (Macmillan, 2020 p3). The same research also found that community action during COVID-19 catalysed the interest of policymakers to invest in community-led infrastructure.

However, not all areas chose to explicitly invest in the development of resident networks. One partnership perceived that there was plenty of existing, ongoing community action in their area through local volunteer organisations, and therefore felt further investment was not necessary. However, some organisations the partnership did choose to invest in, such as a volunteer-supported men's group (which could itself be viewed as a small resident network) became sustainable due to Big Local funding. Another area chose a task-and-finish group format to move projects forward with key residents who volunteered their time on a project-by-project basis. While these models have strengths, they are limited in terms of realising a wider, longer-term grassroots vision. As other Big Local research found, those areas that focused on valuable but more fragmented activities without making broader connections between them and wider local strategies limited their potential for growing and sustaining wider, more distributed power (Wilson et al., 2022b).

Multiple and varied activities

Summary

Investing in resident-led activities enhances individual and collective capacity and agency, and promotes ownership.

For communities to have power they must participate and be engaged. Our research found that investing in new and existing activities, events, and groups facilitated community power by:

- presenting opportunities for residents to become involved and engaged with Big Local, growing resident networks
- offering a springboard for turning ideas into actions, promoting learning and agency along the way
- facilitating ongoing and timely resident-led consultation and distributed decision-making, empowering communities to direct change
- strengthening the capacity of individuals and groups so they have the power to make changes in the community
- fostering inclusion, cohesion, and integration
- encouraging links with other local assets and organisations underpinning community empowerment.

By investing in activities, communities also developed a sense of ownership and power around their area's needs, resulting in their active involvement in decision-making processes and group leadership.

Residents often started their first engagement with Big Local by attending various cultural and social activities. Participation led to increased confidence, and awareness of Big Local money and the opportunities it presented. The activities therefore served as a mechanism to increase Big Local visibility and build volunteer networks and relationships.

 **... if they come along to that (day out), it could be that maybe we go to the opera, we go to a football match, we take them out, about, whatever... What we've seen come from that is increased confidence. And then what happens naturally (is) a quick jump from participation straight to volunteering."**

(Area 1, ripple effect workshop)

 **... We've helped a number of groups set up miniature groups like us for their local areas. And that's been a great change. And we can now work together with them."**

(Area 1, interview with partnership member)

In one area, the partnership and paid worker actively encouraged community members to come up with new activities and present them for review by other residents and partnership members. Activities were never refused; rather, the partnership supported the presenter (or presenters) with opportunities to strengthen their plan of delivery. This built the capacity of the individual or group to think through the reality of how an activity might be run, including all costs and resources. In this way, communities had ownership of ideas, and grew confidence to move them forward.

 **You tell them: ‘You are in charge, you are the one making decisions. What do you want to see?’ And we started telling young people, ‘if you have an idea, present it to the board and we may be able to give you some grant funding’... It’s (due to) giving incentives like that (that) people came with ideas, left, right, centre.”**

(Area 1, interview with partnership member)

Funding activities provided safe spaces to learn by doing and to develop community leadership capacity.

 **The (named) football club... it’s pulled that community together in activities. They’re really thinking about how they’re going to use (the building in which Big Local money was invested) in a very positive way... people coming together and saying: ‘Actually, you know, we can do this, we can help.’ It’s kind of brought lots of different people together (to discuss potential) for a social hub, while the football’s going on... It isn’t just money, support has been through... listening and building confidence...”**

(Area 4, ripple effect mapping workshop)

Participants spoke about the different skills they learned from volunteering, the adaptability they gained from working in different roles, and their exposure to different aspects of their community of which they were not previously aware.

 **I’ve learned about my community, I’ve learned what is actually in the area, where people are struggling, where we can help, why we’re needed, why places like this community are needed.”**

(Area 2, interview with partnership member)

Initial seed-funding and ongoing community consultation were undertaken throughout the lifetime of Big Local, either by partnerships or through the commissioning of consultation experts. However, traditional forms of consultations, such as surveys, did not yield high response rates. They were also sometimes insufficient to reflect quickly changing community needs over the timeline of Big Local, especially with the impact of COVID-19. More successful routes of community engagement came through sustained and regular activities, groups, and events funded using Big Local money.

While activities, events, and groups were one strand in a broader web of community empowerment, their impacts were limited if they did not form part of a medium to long-term vision with embedded strategies for strengthening capacity and resident networks. In areas where lots of activities were funded but not connected by a longer-term plan, any benefits from resultant shifts in power were less visible. In addition, decisions around which activities were delivered and when needed to be driven by both the community and partnership to ensure they reflected the full diversity of each area.

Strong connections across local organisations

Summary

Money can help strengthen local connections and cohesion between organisations, facilitating opportunities to exercise community power.

Having money to spend helped Big Local partnerships better understand the organisational landscape in their area. This allowed them to use their funding to support local groups and organisations to come together and become stronger. This in turn reinforced their ability to work collectively, and increased their power to influence decisions and resources affecting their lives. Organisations included local charities, CICs, CIOs, small and large community groups (constituted or not) working for the benefit of communities, public bodies, and business or development enterprises. Money has – and still is – being used:

- to support the development and connections of new and existing community groups and organisations benefitting residents, creating opportunities for community growth
- as a stepping stone to attract additional, jointly managed resources from different streams by demonstrating the community's readiness and capability to manage funds for community benefit
- to host and facilitate coordinated events and activities, enhancing connectivity between local organisations and residents, leading to opportunities for the community to influence and make decisions regarding the use of local resources
- to secure a place for the community's voice on influential decision-making boards within local businesses or development enterprises.

Community-level functions and sources of power were improved by having local intelligence about the array of community activity going on in the area within organisations and groups, and seeking to coordinate or connect these (Wilson et al., 2022a p14).

Our research found that when communities have funds to support their interests, they are better able to explore and comprehend the organisational landscape in their region. This helps connect, support and unite local organisations, including small and large community groups, public bodies, funders, and businesses, allowing them to work together and provide mutual support to empower residents in various ways.

For instance, during Big Local, financial support allowed for the development and connections of new and existing community groups and organisations, which benefited residents. This support often took the form of small to medium grants to community groups, or matching funds from other sources. This approach not only facilitated cooperation with other funders and influential parties, but also highlighted the ability of residents to make decisions and implement projects for the good of the community.

One significant benefit has been seen when initial funding acted as a stepping stone to attract additional resources from different streams. This initial spending demonstrated the community in question's readiness and capability to manage funds effectively, and thus unlocked more funding opportunities.

 **Spending has been an enabler to unlock funding from other sources; having that initial priming money available so that you can go out and demonstrate that you've got a level of funding enables you to pick up other funding from other funding streams."**

(Area 4, river of life workshop)

Generally, immediate successes like these also increased awareness among residents of Big Local opportunities, fostered community spirit, and supported partnership learning around financial decisions. Importantly, they showcased the transformative potential of funds for local organisations, encouraging communities to come together to realise their power. In one instance, informal grant allocation enabled smaller groups, which might not typically have qualified for funding, to receive financial support.

 **...Small grants meant that those groups suddenly went, 'Oh actually, no, I don't need a committee, I don't need a treasurer, I don't need a bank account'... I can have £200 to try something out for my little group to see whether it becomes a bigger group... and they've gone from strength to strength and haven't come back and asked for any more money. They're now self-funding and self-supporting."**

(Area 3, river of life workshop)

This grant-giving approach empowered community organisations (led by residents) to address local needs and foster connections, eventually leading them to become self-sufficient and not reliant on further funding from Big Local. For example, in Area 1, the partnership supported the financial development of a new startup CIC that would focus on creative community engagement. This partnership then also facilitated strategic links with decision-makers in the local authority, which was instrumental in gaining additional funding for the CIC. The CIC went on to employ young people who had gained experience as volunteers through Big Local, increasing economic opportunities for young people in the area. Its owner spoke of her gratitude to Big Local for supporting her business. Others viewed the CIC as a new way for both communities and local authorities to understand local problems and needs, with strategic connections with powerholders enhancing its impact on the community and local governance.

Collaborations across local organisations and agencies extended to working with local authorities, healthcare service providers, police, schools, local public and private service providers, and other not-for-profit agencies to address community needs. For example, some partnerships brought together different service providers and sources of support into one shared community venue, opening up access to advice services, the local authority, and councillors to residents more widely.

 **A drop-in surgery meant that those agencies involved collaborated more and were there to respond to community needs in a way that wasn't happening otherwise."**

(Area 3, river of life workshop)

Collaborations between Big Local partnerships, local organisations, and agencies not only delivered services to better meet community needs, but also enhanced mutual understanding of local challenges. For instance, one partnership commissioned the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) to help people manage issues related to debt, universal credit, and the cost-of-living crisis. This service provided monthly reports on prevalent local issues, helping the partnership understand the needs of disadvantaged communities and make spending decisions informed by real-time data.

 **The CAB did bring in people who needed help... It gave us (the Big Local partnership) an idea of what the problems were, and what people needed and wanted."**

(Area 3, river of life workshop)

Successful collaborations were often marked by strong relationships with local organisations, businesses, and service providers, as well as community involvement in wider discussions about resource allocation. Off the back of successful collaboration, some areas accessed further funding, or were commissioned by local authorities (or larger organisations) for consultations or service delivery, thus opening spaces of influence and decision-making to the community.

However, some areas experienced challenges and dilemmas in their attempts to collaborate with local organisations and agencies. For example, one partnership struggled because they were unable to evidence the value of attending shared events to local providers, which posed risks to future collaborative efforts.

 **Local organisations and powerholders didn't see the benefit of being involved, and giving up a very long evening to meet us and other residents. The ongoing issue is trying to get them engaged again."**

(Area 4, interview with partnership member)

Another challenge for some areas has been assessing the motivations and values held by larger private sector initiatives intending to effect change in communities. For some partnerships, having money secured a community voice on the committees controlling these developments, enabling residents to influence the changes. For example, in one area, a new green business development initiative welcomed working with the Big Local partnership, who attended board meetings and influenced how the site would move forward.

 **The development site were very good with us, and we worked with them. We were going to use Big Local money to enhance the pathway that was going to join the villages, and they were very keen to do that, because the site sells itself as a 'good neighbour'. The manager was one of the first people outside the partnership that really got it, and he would try to attend meetings to understand where we were progressing."**

(Area 4, interview with partnership member)

However, this has not always been the case. In some situations, residents and partnerships have felt powerless as changes happened around them. For example, in one area, substantial community development funds (far greater than Big Local money) were offered to resident groups to offset a negative environmental impact initiative. These community funds could have supported more projects in the community and helped to secure a larger legacy for Big Local. However, the principles of the development did not align with those of the area, and were thought by the partnership to undermine the voices of those in the community who did not want the project to move forward.



It's one of those funds that could actually cause reputational damage... It's a classic example of something you have to consider with every funding bid. So we're quite strict about who we will work with and who we won't work with."

(Area 3, river of life workshop)

In this instance, however, the initiative was expected to proceed, because Big Local funding was insufficient to influence change – leaving the community in question feeling powerless to do anything to stop it. This situation shows the limitations of what £1.15 million can achieve in terms of community influence, and why partnerships felt it has been important to be cautious around large private sector initiatives in terms of building or growing community power.

Overall, the availability of funds to strengthen, support, and connect organisations within an area has been crucial for resident-led power to thrive. Over time, in some areas, collaborative efforts between public agencies, local

organisations, funders, and communities led to increased trust and the establishment of shared goals. However, maintaining these relationships requires continuous effort, mutual understanding, and shared goals.

These findings are reflected in other Big Local literature, which found that over time, trust and respect increased between local agencies, organisations, and communities as they worked together. These collaborations, often on jointly funded activities, were generally branded and marketed as 'joint enterprises' (Wilson et al., 2022a). However, reports also indicated that these relationships could be fluid and fragile, often taking time to establish and reestablish as staff, contexts, and energy changed during the Big Local programme. They were also linked and dependent on the availability of capacity and resources to work together on both sides. With these factors in place, partnerships learned to speak the language of and developed shared goals with the organisations they collaborated with, connected organisations in the community, and created opportunities for community representation within existing organisations and public agencies (Lyon et al., 2022).

The previous sections have discussed how Big Local funding supported and enabled community power to grow over time. Thinking about how power can develop over time, a track record of successful projects, whether through grants or larger initiatives, also demonstrated the power of strategic investment. These successful projects not only built a positive reputation but also attracted further investment, showcasing how well directed funding can lead to sustainable community-led action and shift power dynamics, ultimately contributing to a lasting legacy of empowered communities.

Money's relationship to power: the journey over time

Establishing a track record of success

Summary

Using money to establish a track record of successful community leadership and delivery leads to a new enabling climate for engaging residents as agents of change.

When money has been used to strategically develop a strong reputation of success, community power has flourished and capitalised on these gains. Developing a track record of success has – and is – being done differently in Big Local areas depending on the context, partnership governance, decision-making, and motivations.

- Grant-giving has been shown to be a useful way to demonstrate a community's capacity to make change, especially when grants had a clear purpose and were positioned within a longer-term shared vision.
- Multi-agency flagship projects were instrumental in establishing a solid track record of tangible outcomes for residents.
- Having a track record of success secured significant additional investment for sustainable longer-term outcomes and impacts.
- Initial conflicts with powerholders shifted as the reputation of a partnership grew through the Big Local lifetime.

Without having money to expose power imbalances, strengthen capacity, and build enablers of power (listed in earlier sections of this paper) residents would have been limited in their ability to demonstrate their power to lead and create change in the places they lived.

In our research, and other studies about Big Local, power is explicitly linked to the ability of partnerships to spend the money in a way that promotes resident agency, generates a track record of leadership and success in terms of creating change, and connects residents with other networks with shared goals. Developing a track record of success has been done differently depending on the context, partnership governance, decision-making, and motivations. For instance, through grant-giving or larger-scale flagship projects.

In some areas, achieving what partnerships considered to be 'quick wins' through grant-giving was deemed logical, especially in the early days of Big Local. However, the extent to which money could become an enabler of power has been contingent on positioning grant-giving within a longer-term vision, which required a level of forward-thinking and strategic planning.



Very similar things emerged (among people discussing needs) as key themes earlier on, and then we looked at what could be achieved short term, mid-term and longer term...”

(Area 2, interview with LTO)



There's been a concerted effort to make people realise (Big Local money) is not a funding pot, it's there to provide funds to influence outcomes. It was nicknamed ‘the Bank’!”

(Area 4, river of life workshop)

Other research from Local Trust identified certain important characteristics of successful grant-giving (Davis et al., 2022). One of these was linking grants to a clear purpose and shared vision. The same research found that community grants being aligned with a partnership's wider strategic priorities was beneficial, both in terms of linking community grant outcomes to a wider vision, and ensuring that vague or unsustainable approaches to grant-giving didn't limit the growth of community power. Such an approach gave partnership members a lens through which to focus their thinking about who, what, and how to fund, thus increasing access, fairness, and transparency around grant allocation. It also supported a deeper understanding of where community grants could strengthen community agency and power (Davis et al., 2022).

At one point or another, most partnerships acknowledged the limitations of grant-giving and moved on to larger so-called ‘flagship’ projects, which had greater potential to grow community power and demonstrate the value of community-led action. However, capacity to confidently spend through bigger projects has been impacted by partnership stability and the support available from local powerholders. Challenges in these areas meant some partnerships primarily spent their funding through grant-giving.

Therefore, in terms of transferring power to residents, understanding the limitations and strengths of grant-giving was an important consideration for partnerships in the initial years of Big Local. Notably, the non-prescriptive and long-term nature of Big Local funding did present opportunities for residents to think big and be ambitious – and where partnerships had engaged in large, multi-organisation, resident-led projects that were visible, responded to a wider vision, and told a story of resident capacity and leadership, they were able to shift existing power dynamics in communities.

Having a track record of successes also helped some areas to attract significant additional investment (in one case, over £1.5 million in addition to Big Local money) and identify models for sustainable funding. This evidence base of successful community-led change demonstrates that while Big Local money was needed initially to build up resident-led power, areas have from there been able to run independently and attract funding to meet community needs.



... first of all, the funders who know your work, such as NHS, such as the local authority, are more likely to trust you and are more likely to commission you to do things.”

(Area 1, river of life workshop)

This was demonstrated in one area when they secured funding from the National Lottery Community Fund so they could take ownership of delivering a key service for their residents. The partnership in question believed this was made possible by the initial Big Local investment they used to secure an asset transfer of a community building, alongside their work with smaller groups and resident networks in the area.



We put this bid in, which was for about £370,000 over a three-year programme, focused on the mental health of young people, and amazingly for our area, we got it... but that was a real turning point for us. That's when the big power shift changed."

(Area 2, river of life workshop)

Finally, there is clear evidence that the conflicts with powerholders experienced by some areas (as discussed earlier in this report) shifted because of the reputation for success that had been built up by partnerships through the Big Local lifetime.

"We do get access to influential politicians in the area. We have a good understanding. It's very much a hands-off relationship, but if we want to talk to them, we can talk to them, and they do listen to us, as does the leader of the council, and as does the local MP... and that is a very tangible thing, that has come from (Big Local spending)." (Area 1, interview with partnership member)

Over the course of the Big Local programme, the money supported partnerships to navigate complex power structures, develop capacity, put in place key enablers to grow and sustain community power, and establish track records of successes. All of these together have the potential to leave lasting legacies of community power.

Community power when the Big Local funding is spent

Summary

In the last stages of Big Local, money plays a key role in establishing a legacy that will continue to advance community power.

As Big Local comes to an end, the legacy of community power will reflect the strengths and limitations of context, relationships, power structures, and shifts of power achieved throughout the programme, and will depend on the following:

- the future aspirations of partnerships and residents for community-led action and the timing of that vision; those partnerships that started planning their legacy early on had time to establish ideas and ensure their sustainability beyond Big Local
- the relationships that have been nurtured successfully or otherwise throughout Big Local that enable community power
- the energy of residents and partnership members to continue engaging in the community development space, which will depend on their experience and learning gained from managing Big Local money
- the level of additional funding secured now, and the mechanisms in place to attract new funding that continues to prioritise community agency as a principle
- the physical and cultural legacies established with sustained plans for integration within existing structures or the development of a new, sustainable organisation from which Big Local learning can grow.

This (and other) research has presented different legacies that Big Local partnerships left or might leave beyond the programme. These include: physical legacies; shaping local services and facilities through social enterprises and influencing policymakers and service providers; people-based legacies of skilled and confident residents; and cultural legacies of people feeling more positive about where they live (Wilson et al., 2022b).

In our research, partnerships shared about how they had invested in developing people-based legacies by nurturing a wider pool of active and connected residents who could continue working together into the future. This could take the form of a community foundation, charity, community interest company (CIC) or charitable incorporated organisation (CIO). These bodies, set up

to continue beyond Big Local, would still focus on meeting community needs identified by residents using community infrastructure built during Big Local. These new community organisations were usually developed either in collaboration with local powerholder agencies, or new organisations that were supported by Big Local funding and actions.



... all this history and all the things we've done, we've got a proven track record of delivery. So that means that we, as a charity, just one year old, have actually got engagement and are being commissioned by the council, NHS, and other organisations to do things – because they trust us, because of that past history”

(Area 1, river of life workshop)

While Big Local money was needed initially to build up resident-led initiatives, areas have from that point been able to attract alternative sources of funding to support continued delivery in the future.

By creating a new organisation, residents ensured that the power they gained through Big Local could remain and grow – including having control over how resources coming into the area were used. One area started having legacy conversations several years before the end of Big Local, which allowed time to invest in community consultation and work with other stakeholders to develop a model for their new organisation that was informed by communities.



There were two main legacy items for us. One was a community garden, and the other one was setting up a charity, because we held a series of about three legacy meetings where everyone was saying, ‘we want to continue, but we want to widen our sphere of influence and operation.’

(Area 1, river of life workshop)

Some partnerships decided with residents to extend their reach beyond the official geographic Big Local boundary, hoping that their learning from the programme could expand and support other resident-led action further afield.

For partnerships that did not gain momentum until the latter years of Big Local, there has been less time to develop a sustainable legacy. For example, one partnership reflected on the length of time it took to embed Big Local into the community, and expressed concerns about their newly established CIC being introduced too close to the end of Big Local funding. This has unknown implications for the continuation of any community power that has been built through the partnership.



... if you put (the CIC) back there (at the middle of Big Local timeline), then by now, they would have been sustainable. (The legacy organisation) would need to bring in additional funds to become more significant; at the moment it's just one employed person and a board of directors, which is difficult.”

(Area 3 river of life workshop)

At the time of our research, the impact of these newly formed organisations for the long-term sustainability of community power remains to be seen. However, some reasonable assumptions can be made based on the evidence collected, especially as some of these continuing organisations were established and ran alongside Big Local for several years. Early indications suggested that those partnerships that succeeded in building community organisations within strong community-led infrastructure and with a long-term vision of resident-led action for change had laid foundations for sustaining power.

However, this has not been the case for all; some partnership members, despite substantial learning from Big Local, have reported fatigue and frustration around navigating power structures and struggles with local powerholders, and ultimately decided not to set up a legacy organisation. One partnership reported fearing that, because the development of a legacy organisation already lacked sufficient input from residents, the future of resident power in their area was at risk.

 **(Partnership members) are tired. They have given and given and given... You're trying to do something in the community, and you're just faced with bureaucracy."**

(Area 3, river of life workshop)

The general legacy of Big Local, and of any new community organisations established through the programme, is also likely to be vulnerable to changes in socio-political structures, changing spaces of democracy, and future community policy.

For other partnerships, sustainability and legacy are about physical and cultural legacies. Rather than setting up new organisations, it is about putting in place the conditions for community economic development and leaving assets behind for the benefit of local people. This also has the potential to support community power.

 **I think that's probably one of the biggest parts of the legacy, really... In some cases, we have actually rescued community spaces, and certainly improved most of the ones in the area, which has enabled lots and lots of communities to keep using these facilities and enjoy them... I've never known so much community engagement."**

(Area 3, river of life workshop)

Conclusion

Our research demonstrates how the relationship between money and community power evolved over time during the Big Local programme. Initially, there are struggles for control of the money; at this stage, communities have little power, and must negotiate control with powerholders. This dynamic can be disempowering for some individuals as the safety that comes from a collective body is yet to be established.

However, the research showed that once resident-led partnerships are established, and the values of partnerships agreed upon, money becomes a tool that enables the creation of spaces and places where residents can come together, reflect, learn and participate with others. From here, power shifts from the individual to the collective, generating a communal sense of purpose. Partnerships see their funding as a source of power because it builds community capital and capacity, which are strengthened through investment. This leads to a growing belief that change is possible through resident leadership and advocacy – when the resources are available.

As projects are successfully delivered using the money, an evidence base of resident-led change can be produced, and pathways to creating community leadership roles in local development and decision-making forums established. From here, community partnerships, organisations, and small groups can invest in finding and establishing ways to be self-sufficient, leading to less reliance on Big Local money.

Within Big Local, strong community foundations within resident-led networks, and with links to community members, attracted new collaborators and funding. This resulted in increased influence and control over resources in the area, and saw the web of community power begin to expand and strengthen. From here, historic doubt about resident-led change can begin to shift through successful spending and resulting outcomes, leading to new, enabling conditions for engaging residents in change. Structural and systemic channels of decision-making can then be altered to include spaces for community input and action in the long term. Finally, the money enables the development of a legacy that can continue to strengthen the power of residents.

The research shows that funding being non-prescriptive (as is the nature of Big Local funding) is key to building community power over time. This opens spaces of discovery, and allows communities to be responsive and active participants in the forces and resources that affect their daily lives. This kind of funding would not have been possible without an extended timeline like that of Big Local, as the web of community power takes time to construct and emerge before becoming resilient.

The caveat to the above is that the relationship between money and community power exists on a continuum towards an ideal goal, and is not linear. The extent to which any partnership achieves any combination of the above processes will vary depending on the context, purpose, and people involved. Not all partnerships will experience each step in this process, or the steps may look different.

What is clear is the need for a holistic approach to building and sustaining community power. Money can enable power in communities when it is used to create an interlinked web of community foundations and components that can support communities to have influence and control over resources and decisions that affect their lives.

This report provides valuable insights for funders; based on the outcomes of the Big Local programme, it stresses the need for flexible funding approaches, attention to the dynamics of external support, and a focus on building sustained community power through thoughtful spending models and resident leadership within strong, community-led infrastructure.

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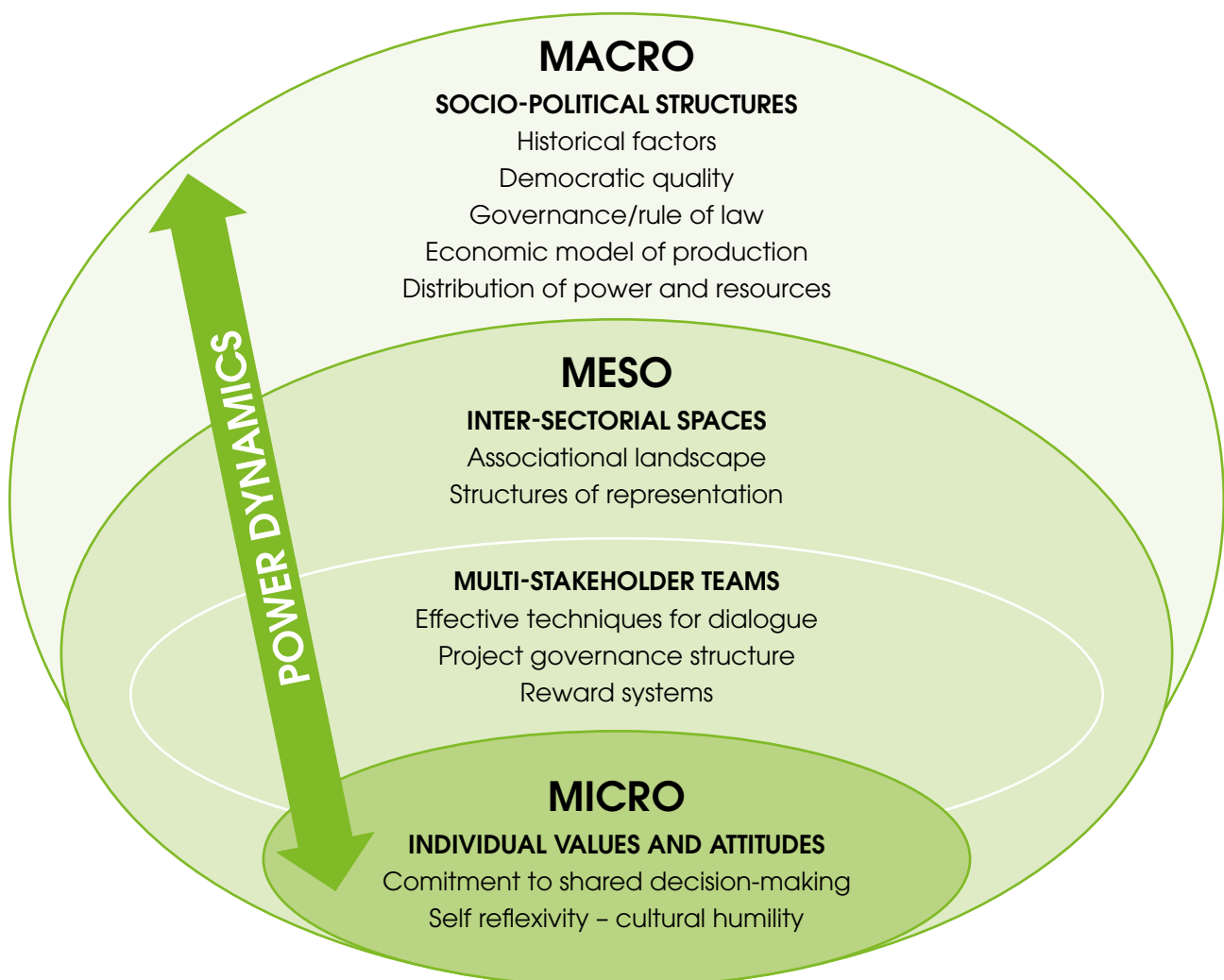
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Appendices

Appendix 1: The ‘social ecology of power’ framework

The social ecology of power is a multi-level conceptual framework that explicitly situates power dynamics within a wider system of bidirectional interconnections operating at the individual, interpersonal, and structural levels. It serves as a tool with which to examine and address these dynamics in a comprehensive and systematic way. The framework is especially helpful for evaluating projects in which power dynamics operate in subtle ways.

Figure 4. The social ecology of power framework (Roura, 2021)



Appendix 2: Summary of case study area contexts

The following summaries have been compiled from interviews and participatory discussions with participants, and are designed to give a feel for the areas in which the research took place. The fieldwork was completed in autumn 2023, and the contents of this appendix reflect the areas at that time.

Area 1

Area 1 is a dense urban area in London that is less than a year away from the end of their Big Local funding. They secured over £1.5 million of additional funds as a direct result of Big Local.

The area is composed of four large housing estates. They are described by residents as historically “fractured” and viewed as highly independent, with people from different estates rarely interacting, aside from in schools. The area is home to people of many different nationalities speaking over 100 different languages; 83 per cent of residents are black or minority ethnic. There are high

levels of deprivation in the area, and key issues around crime, poverty and life satisfaction. Working with young people was a key focus for the partnership.

The community is comprised of a large transient population – many of the inhabitants stay in the area for only a short time, and are engaged in temporary shift work at the main local employer. Limited community assets existed in the area before the Big Local partnership; these included a primary school, community college, and small council-run building.

Area 2

Area 2 is a dense urban area in the Midlands, with between one and two years left of Big Local funding. They secured over £2.5 million of additional funds as a direct result of Big Local.

The area is formed of two distinct, diverse housing estates. Communities within these estates are extremely close-knit, with many families having lived on the estates for generations. As such, engagement with the communities for Big Local initiatives was seen as highly dependent on creating strong relationships with families and tapping into social networks. Both estates face significant social deprivation and are marked by high levels of intergenerational unemployment.

Partly as a result of negative press coverage over the years, the area also has a reputation for having high crime rates and being a difficult place to live. Historically, interaction between residents of the two estates was limited, and relations poor; there was a strong sense of ‘them and us’ on both sides.

The partnership is made up of nine local residents, supported by two consultants. When needed, local councillors are very supportive of the partnership and their work. The LTO is a resident-led tenant-management organisation, in which all board members are volunteers who live on the estates they manage and are democratically elected by the community. The LTO took over management of the estate from the local authority, and as such are well-connected in the area.

Area 3

Area 3 is coastal area of small towns and villages in East England with less than a year of Big Local funding remaining. They brought in under £100,000 of additional funds as a direct result of Big Local.

The area covers three coastal villages. Despite being almost contiguous and sharing the same stretch of beach, the different investment and development histories of each community has led them to evolve distinct identities. However, the area is broadly considered by residents to have been effectively 'left behind'; it is geographically isolated, with extremely poor transport links, and faced severe cutbacks of services during austerity. The population expands considerably in the summer months during tourist season. Tourism is the main source of income in the area, and little exists in terms of other industries. The population has a very high

proportion of over-60s, many of whom are retirees who moved to the area to enjoy the coast – though many ultimately move away again when they become frail and ill because of the poor access to health services.

The composition of the partnership has evolved significantly over the years, reflecting the transience of the area. Participants spoke about how it had been difficult to recruit new people to the partnership board with Big Local funding coming to an end. The LTO is a community foundation, who already had a strong presence in the community before Big Local. The foundation itself is resident-led and experienced in distributing funds and providing financial advice.

Area 4

Area 4 is a collection of rural villages in Southwest England, with over two years left of Big Local funding. They brought in under £100,000 of additional funds as a direct result of Big Local.

The area is comprised of two villages, which are ethnically 97.7 per cent white. One village is socially deprived, facing challenges with crime and poor-quality social housing. The other is more heterogeneous in terms of socioeconomic status of residents, containing a mix of affluent and poorer residents. The two villages are disconnected from each other by a stretch of country road; they have separate identities, and little in common.

Tensions between the two villages affected the Big Local partnership and limited their ability to spend their Big Local funding. Support from Local Trust enabled the partnership to become more stable; now task-and-finish groups led by residents and experts are delivering projects in the community. The LTO is a community-based provider of social housing. Two paid workers were hired to support with community engagement and managing relationships between the villages, and an advisor was also hired to support with business and legal aspects.

Appendix 3: 'River of life' methodology

The river of life is a creative tool for reflection to describe the life journey or historical timeline for community-engaged projects (Howard, 2023). Its purpose is to uncover the histories and influences that motivate individual and organisational partners to promote community empowerment, increase community participation in the process, and promote change outcomes.

This method involves drawing a symbolic river, with 'springs' to show the inputs that helped develop partnership; 'tributaries' to show how the river or partnership grows with capacity-strengthening and engagement with other stakeholders and resources; 'obstacles' (represented by boulders, rapids, or waterfalls) to depict challenges in the partnership development; and 'streams' that leave the river to grow new projects or opportunities. The process begins with individual reflections, which are then brought together as a group and drawn out as the river on paper. A timeline is then added under the river.

To ensure inclusivity and accessibility to all participants, participants in this research had the option to draw, use collage, or instruct one of the facilitators about what they'd like included in the river.

Figure 2. Example of river of life workshop drawing



Appendix 4: 'Ripple effect mapping' methodology

Ripple effect mapping (REM) aims to help partnerships reflect upon and visually map intended and unintended changes and consequences of engagement in a project (Chazdon et al, 2017). REM helps learning within collaborations that are expected to produce broad or deep changes in a community.

In this research, the core of the session involved participants contributing to a visual mapping process to brainstorm and map the effects (or 'ripples') of the changes seen from Big Local (both beneficial and detrimental). This method was selected to encourage thinking beyond the immediate impact of the money to the longer-term, less obvious impacts from changes in skills – such as confidence, ability and capacity, as well as new networks, on individuals, the partnership, and the community. While river of life sessions focused more on the past, REM brought out current and potential future impacts.

Participants also thought about how the power of the community has changed through a series of micro changes or small steps that may have been linked to having money or resources.

A template ('mega map') was providing to bring all the participants' thoughts together. To ensure there were no barriers to participation, participants could either add their thoughts directly to the map on sticky notes, or instruct a facilitator to add their thoughts on their behalf.

Figure 3. Example of ripple effect map



Appendix 5: Participant numbers and roles within Big Local

Activity	Total number of participants
Interviews	13 (plus two additional validation interviews)
River of life workshop	22
Ripple effect mapping workshop	29
Combined online workshop	7

About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources, and decision-making into the hands of communities.

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding, and to draw on the learning from our work delivering the Big Local programme to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

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DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.29822300

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