CIVIC REWILDING

Applying the lessons from Big Local

A practical guide

kinship works

Local Trust

www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk

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Over the last 15 years, Britain has been home to one of the world's biggest ever experiments in restoring social capital.

As the programme draws to an end, we ask: did it work? And what does it teach us about the practice of reviving civic life?

About

Kinship Works

Kinship Works is a network of people supporting more human ways of making society better - as alternatives to bureaucracy.

We help organisations and systems break out of the sticky and often inhuman patterns of bureaucracy to build something more organic. We centre the human stuff, from relationships, to places, to the infrastructure and rituals of a thriving civic life.

We are supporting the civic renewal that is starting to flourish in local communities across Britain, and in much of the developed world. We believe this revival of civic life is key to making progress on the complex challenges that confront us, from loneliness, to chronic physical and mental ill-health, to long-term worklessness.

Our experienced practitioners can help with the tricky work of being more human in a bureaucratic world - from data and evidence, to movement-building, leadership, and organisational design.

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Executive Summary

What was Big Local?

The Big Local programme gave just over £1m each to 150 neighbourhoods in England to be spent in ways the local community felt were most appropriate to address local needs. Each neighbourhood was materially disadvantaged and had low social capital: they were doubly disadvantaged places.

The programme was long term, running over 10-15 years. It was underpinned by local governance arrangements that put communities in control. Independent of central government - supported by an independent organisation, Local Trust, at arm's length from its funder, the National Lottery Community Fund - communities had maximum power over decision-making, and discretion over the activities they would undertake.[1]

Big Local stimulated significant local activity, most of which falls within six categories: events, gatherings and meetups; financial and employment support; buying and renewing local buildings and other civic infrastructure; health and wellbeing activities; activities for young people; and running local small grants schemes.

Local Trust, the independent lead organisation, provided support and guidance to Big Local places, but consciously stepped back from imposing ideas. Communities were in the driving seat. The underlying philosophy was that, with space and resources, communities could develop the capacity to improve social outcomes, and bring about a healthier and more active society.

[1]When Big Local started, the National Lottery Community Fund was called the Big Lottery Fund.

What did Big Local achieve?

Big Local achieved a range of quantifiable and qualitative outcomes, backed by rigorous evaluation findings and personal testimony, among a range of evidence. It led to statistically significant improvements in mental health and burglary rates in Big Local areas, and was cost effective in terms of its financial return. The relatively small amount of investment - around £12 per person per year - resulted in significant payback.

The programme achieved these outcomes by stimulating an organic expansion of civic capacity. People involved in Big Local reported a stronger sense of agency and confidence in their ability to affect positive change locally, as well as improved community cohesion and a decrease in social isolation. Participants went on to start new community organisations, find new jobs, learn new skills or improve their health. Civic life became more active, and this fed a positive spiral; as more local activity took place, connections, trust and mutual support grew stronger.

How did it work?

We can think of Big Local and similar programmes as a parallel to rewilding in environmentalism. As a programme, Big Local nurtured, cultivated and spread processes that were organic and locally rooted, but did not direct what was planted, or where things should take root. It worked partly by protecting and restoring the habitats of a thriving community life - civic spaces like youth clubs, or libraries - in a sense, rewilding civic capacity.

Big Local's funding created space, allowing communities to follow instincts that were different from the bureaucratic instincts of public institutions. Time and again, the work that happened locally was holistic, relational, resourceful, positive and preventative. It also tapped into community knowledge of local needs and assets.

As the programme matured, the work grew deeper roots. It came together with similar initiatives from organisations like Power to Change, and a wider bottom-up movement for community-led development. A new field, practicing community and neighbourhood-led renewal, emerged. This marks a move away from the idea that social improvement is about finding the right policy 'answer' to a problem, and then 'rolling out' or 'scaling' the answer across localities. Instead,

civic renewal cultivates the conditions for communities to make life better. The work doesn't scale, it spreads.

This field has matured just as we need it. Public institutions are increasingly overwhelmed by complex societal challenges, from mental illness to loneliness, to climate change and long-term worklessness. Meanwhile our public mood is gripped by an increasingly fractious and fatalistic politics. Too many communities can't see, and don't directly experience, a way to make things better.

Partly in response to these challenges, the UK government is now embarking on a new generation of investment in neighbourhoods, via its Pride in Place initiative. If this work applies the lessons from programmes like Big Local, it can add momentum to an increasingly powerful and timely movement for civic renewal.

Introduction

In the world of social science, the 2000s were the decade of social capital. Sparked by the publication of Robert Putnam's landmark study of America's social fabric, Bowling Alone, the academic literature grew quickly. There were comparative studies in countries from Britain to Australia, and investigations into the correlations and causal links between social capital and other variables. This confirmed a wider pattern of decline and pointed to worrying implications, from health to social mobility. Interest also grew in related concepts, from community agency to the civic infrastructure that is required for a rich associational life.

In this report, we define social capital as the networks of relationships and the norms of reciprocity we share. Within groups this is called bonding capital, and across groups it is known as bridging capital. Social capital speaks to the way social ties have a power and value of their own. These social phenomena can shape everything from our economic prospects in life, to our happiness and life expectancy. Social capital - and civic life, generally - operate in organic ways, via intangible materials, like trust and the felt quality of relationships. This gives social capital a unique quality: unlike other forms of capital, when you spend it, you generate more of it.

This all prompts some thorny questions. If social capital is important and depleted, and at the same time is made of organic and intangible materials, is there anything we can do to restore it? Is it possible to repair civic life and social capital? And if so, how?

As the UK government embarks on its Pride in Place initiative, a multi-billion pound investment in doubly disadvantaged areas (places that suffer both material disadvantage and a depleted social fabric), these questions are newly relevant. They have also been becoming harder to ignore, and more urgent, for the last two decades.

In the 2010s, the UK government led a decade of deep cuts to public spending, one justification

of which was that, if we shrink the state, society will flourish in its place. In the event, cuts to public spending seemed to exacerbate the hollowing out of communities, as civic spaces like libraries, community centres and youth clubs closed in large numbers. Far from being rejuvenated, communities finished the decade more depleted than before.

At the same time, however, the Conservative government's interest in the Big Society was not entirely performative. New powers were given to local communities - to buy local buildings, or to bid to run public services - and in 2010 we saw the start of a quiet but radical experiment called Big Local. It asked: what if we gave £1m each to 150 deprived communities, with no strings attached? Could a direct injection of resources give communities the time and space they needed for repair?

Since then, Big Local and other similar programmes around the world have continued in the background, while the social situation has further deteriorated. By the time Labour took office in 2024 there was growing alarm at the second order effects of civic decay. Public services groan under the weight of complex problems (from mental illness to loneliness to chronic physical ill-health), many of which represent the fallout from our depleted civic life. Meanwhile, public sector bureaucracies have been responding in the only way they know how - with medications, services, and incentives. In the scramble to treat a slew of symptoms, we have failed to address our underlying malaise.

Trends in politics have added greater urgency. There is mounting concern about the collapse of faith in public institutions, and rising public anger, manifesting in a surge of support for populist political parties. This new brand of populism has some familiar qualities - nationalist motifs, an effort to fan grievance into social divisions - and it is amplified by the divisive and radicalising effects of social media. Another notable quality is the way populism is now so rooted in places. We see the rejection of previously mainstream political parties in places that are often now referred to as 'left behind neighbourhoods'.

So it is that the first quarter of the 21st century has put the question of restoring social capital front and centre. And this has happened just as the lessons from experiments like Big Local (as well as international programmes such as Communities for Children in Australia, and Purpose Built Communities in America) have become available. We know more than ever about how this work is done.

For all these reasons, Kinship Works has been working with Local Trust, the organisation that has run Big Local, to share these lessons. Local Trust produced over 100 research reports and

has an in-depth understanding of what happened in all 150 neighbourhoods the programme funded.

This report tells the story of Big Local, and it curates research to help to answer some timely questions. What was Big Local? Did it work? And how should its lessons now be applied to the next generation of investment in places? Alongside this report, Local Trust is opening up a new online resource, Learning from Big Local, making the full bank of Big Local research and case studies easily searchable.

Today the lessons from this work feel more important than ever. Pride in Place and other investments (such as the shift to neighbourhood healthcare) could add significantly to a burgeoning movement. But that will only happen if these programmes learn the lessons from over a decade of work on civic renewal.

Definitions

Debates about social capital and civic life often get tangled in competing definitions. We have tried not to be too precious about fine-grained distinctions. But in the course of writing this report, we had the following broad definitions in mind.

Resident-led development

Initiatives where local residents in a place are enabled to drive change. Often supported in socio economically disadvantaged areas, devolving funding and power so that local people can lead the response to complex societal challenges.

Community-led development

Initiatives driven by a community emphasising democratic control, and community ownership and agency, rather than narrow commercial interests. Rooted in the tradition of Saul Alinsky's community organising, linked to institutions like community land trusts and housing cooperatives.

Place-based change

Work in which the organising logic is a place, as opposed to an issue or population group. Inspired partly by Fabrizio Barca's 2009 EU report on cohesion policy, which

emphasised locally-led development by mobilising local assets, knowledge and institutions. Contrasts with 'spatially blind' approaches.

Social capital

Networks of relationships and norms of reciprocity. Often distinguishes bonding capital (within groups) from bridging capital (across groups). Restoration efforts focus on rebuilding trust and connectivity. See, for example, ONS measures of club membership, volunteering and trust; and Onward's Social Fabric Index.

Civic or community capacity

The capacity of diverse local actors to work together to address common problems through sustained collective action. Distinct from social capital's more networked focus on the quality of relationships; emphasises the activation of collective problem-solving capability. See the Community Needs Index, a dataset that grew out of Big Local that is now being used to select areas for the UK government's Pride in Place initiative.

Community life

The everyday informal interactions and shared activities that take place among residents (e.g. neighbourly exchanges, spontaneous connections). Local restoration efforts often focus on creating welcoming environments and opportunities for casual encounters - microinteractions that repair the relational fabric. See DCMS Community Life Survey.

Associational life

The life we live together in formal and semi formal groups, clubs and organisations (e.g. sports clubs, faith groups, charities, societies). Following Alexis de Tocqueville's analysis of American democracy, emphasises voluntary organisations independent of the state.

Social and civic infrastructure

Enablers of social interaction. Often spaces like libraries, parks, community centres, cafés, and churches. Following Klinenberg's Palaces for the People (2018), emphasises how the built environment shapes connection.[1] Also the soft infrastructure of

organisational capacity - opportunities for self-governance and collective decision-making (e.g. participatory budgeting, community forums, deliberative platforms). See the Bennett Institute's Townscapes programme, which has explored the UK's decline of social infrastructure.[2]

[1]Klinenberg, E (2018), "Palaces for the People: How To Build a More Equal and United Society".The Bodley Head Ltd.

[2]Bennett School of Public Policy (2024), "The Townscapes Project". bennettschool.cam.ac.uk/research/research-projects/townscapes-project/

Part 1: Historical Context

When Big Local started in 2010, it was self-consciously "new and different". It gave unrestricted money to local areas, not specifying a point solution to be delivered, but seeking to grow the capacity of communities. The programme made a long-term commitment upfront, giving local areas the unprecedented security of 10 to 15 years of funding, and time to learn and adapt. There was just one principle insisted upon as part of the programme: local areas had to adopt a '51% rule', making sure the local community itself held the balance of power in deciding how the money would be spent.

To fully grasp how radical this approach was, it is useful to look at the alternative, more technocratic instinct of policy-making that dominates in Whitehall. This has roots that stretch deep into history.

The bureaucratic instinct: A brief history

The form of organisation that we came to call bureaucracy took shape in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It arose as an effort to standardise and professionalise government, making the actions of the state less corrupt and capricious. This was prompted in part by the failure of government to address an array of societal problems that had arisen as a result of the industrial revolution, and were often technical in nature. From processing sewage and sanitising water, to prescribing medicines and distributing unemployment insurance, bureaucracy enabled consistent action at scale.

As the bureaucratic method and its attendant institutions matured, it embedded a mental model of government in which the state was conceived as a machine to solve societal problems (it is during the 19th century that we see the emergence of the metaphor 'the machinery of govern-

ment'). In this model, we improve society by pooling money through taxes to fund institutions staffed by professionals. Those institutions diagnose problems and develop solutions ('policies'), which are then delivered by public institutions.

This way of conceptualising government flows through into a particular relationship between national and local institutions. The national institutions of central government are broadly responsible for policy, outside of defined delegated responsibilities, while local parts of the system are more associated with delivery. From this flows an architecture of delivery: central government funds local institutions to deliver policies. This means in turn that funding comes with specifications and, to ensure probity and value for money, reporting and evaluation requirements, and, over-time, ever more elaborate mechanisms for audit and risk-management. Work tends to be delivered by formally constituted organisations such as a Local Authority, an NHS Trust or a registered charity.

To the extent that there is a role for civic life in this traditional model, it is defined largely in relation to government, again conceived as machinery. Civil society organisations might conduct research, bringing new issues to light, or they might lobby government for changes to policy, or be consulted on policy. They might also deliver services under contract. These civil society organisations are likely to have themselves taken on the forms and mentalities of bureaucracy. Indeed, over this period civil society has come to be dominated by a small number of large charities with similar forms to government bureaucracy.

The civic alternative

What is the alternative to the bureaucratic mode of procedure? In this report we use the word 'civic' as a shorthand for a model that does not centre government as conceiver and deliverer of solutions, but that instead centres the capacities of communities and civic life. This approach thinks of social improvement differently, putting the locus of our shared lives - the motive force for social improvement, and the source of ideas and energy - in the civic sphere.

The civic tradition seeks to make society better by cultivating the capacity of communities, for example by making it easier for people to collaborate. This can mean equipping people to care for each other, to share skills with each other, or to own and run a civic space together. The community, in this model, is a primary source of energy, not just a stakeholder to be consulted,

or a site for service delivery.

In this civic conception , there is still a central role for the state in ensuring key enabling conditions - safety, national security, adequate material incomes. And of course vital technical work - sanitising water, regulating railways, prescribing antibiotics - is still led by professional public servants. In other domains of life, however - challenges like care, for example, or mental wellbeing, loneliness, and long-term worklessness - we see a marked change in the relationship between the state and civil society. The state supports an array of civic institutions, and makes space for communities themselves. This can mean investing in civic infrastructure (e.g. places to meet, like libraries, community centres, and youth clubs). It can mean supporting a vibrant social impact sector, and funding capacity in communities. And it can mean paying professionals who work in service of the community, i.e. doing things *with* people, and not just 'to' or 'for' people. For instance, a doctor might attend a meetup of people who share a chronic health condition, lending medical expertise to a group discussion; or a team of designers and coders might build a platform that communities can use to run exchange schemes for children's clothes and toys, bringing down the cost of living.

The civic tradition is not new. Indeed, it long pre-dates bureaucracy, running all the way back to the notion of public life espoused by Aristotle and through to 18th century thinkers like Adam Ferguson. Victorian debates about civic life often emphasised philanthropy and voluntarism, endowing public spaces like libraries and museums. In modern times, civic life has had prominent advocates, including Nobel economics laureate Elinor Ostrom, and Jane Jacobs. Despite these deep foundations, for much of the last fifty years the civic tradition has been pushed into the background by a more technocratic conception of government. But over the last two decades, this rich tradition has begun to resurface.

The civic renaissance

In the last few years, this old tradition has made a return to the fore of public life. Why has it resurfaced, and why are its methods so timely? In compiling this report, we traced the emergence of civic or communitarian arguments in public discourse and public policy over the last two decades.

We identify four reasons that civic ideas have become more widely accepted. We see them as

steps that build on each other, like a run of stairs.

Step 1. A worsening social, economic, and technological environment

Robert Putnam's Bowling Alone spear-headed a rich literature exploring trends in social capital and the vitality of civic life. These trends are complicated and vary significantly by country. In a number of cases there is evidence that Britain has seen further declines in the health of civic and democratic life since Putnam's work was published. For example:

- **A loss of agency and a sense of distance from politics**
  In 2019, a record high of 47% of people in Britain felt they had no influence over national decision-making and 32% said they do not want to be involved "at all" in local decision-making.[1] In 2023, just 20% of the UK population believed that the political system allowed them to have a say in what government does.[2] In 2025, 72% of people reported that they do not feel they can influence decisions affecting the UK.[3]
- **Ongoing declines in civic participation**
  In 2023/24, only 16% of respondents to a national survey reported that they took part in formal volunteering at least once a month. This had fallen from 27% in 2013/14.[4]
- **A steady rise of loneliness and social isolation**
  In 2023/24, 7% of adults in Britain said they often or always felt lonely. This figure has seen a small but sustained rise since 2021/22, having previously hovered between 5% and 6% between 2013/14 and 2021/22.[5]

Compounding these societal trends, the last decade has seen a more spatially stratified form of inequality.[6] Inter-firm gaps in productivity and wages have risen, while growth has become more concentrated in a small number of highly dynamic local areas, mostly big cities or highly-educated University towns. This has left behind a long tail of disadvantaged areas. In 2025, the average worker in London, Reading and Slough, for example, earned in eight

[1]Audit of Political Engagement 16: The 2019 Report. (2019). Hansard Society. hansardsociety.org.uk/projects/audit-of-political-engagement

[2]OECD. (2024). OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions 2024 Results: Country Notes - United Kingdom. OECD Publishing.

[3]Carnegie UK. (2025). Life in the UK 2025. Carnegie UK Trust.

[4]Department for Culture, Media and Sport. (2024). Community Life Survey 2023/24: Background and Headline Findings. UK Government

[5]ibid

[6]For a fuller exposition of this argument see Plunkett, James (January 2023) 'Unequality: when inequality changes, our strategies must too' , Medium.

months what the average worker in Burnley would earn a year.[7] Cambridge and London now have three times more innovative, cutting-edge businesses per capita than Middlesbrough and Doncaster.[8] Soaring house prices in prosperous areas have closed off the option for people to move closer to high-paying work, which was previously an important route to social mobility. This has constrained labour supply in big cities, further pushing up top end wages.[9]

Finally, trends in technology are amplifying social isolation and division. There is now stark evidence of the worsening mental health of young people, especially teenage girls, linked to the use of social media. There is evidence of growing isolation among younger generations, and rising concerns about screen time addiction; 18-24 year olds in the UK now spend an average of 5 hours 5 minutes a day on a smartphone, while 8-14 year olds spend 2 hours 59 minutes.[10] And there are worries about the social and psychological effects of the digital content people are consuming, and the algorithms that select this content, which evidence suggests both radicalises and isolates individuals.

Added to all of this are the social and cultural effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. On the one hand, the pandemic confirmed the power of civic life, with an initial flourishing of community spirit; in October 2020, twice as many people believed that 'as a society we look after each other', compared to before the pandemic (rising from 24% to 46%).[11] However, the percentage of people reporting positive feelings about their community during the pandemic were at their lowest in eight years, perhaps reflecting an unequal experience. While some communities banded together, others were left behind, and suffered worse rates of infection and hospitalisation.[12]

Step 2. The second order fallout

These trends describe a worsening social, economic, and cultural environment. But just as important has been a growing awareness of the second order effects of this environment. In the last decade, we have developed a better understanding of the links between a depleted

[7] Centre for Cities. (2025). Cities Outlook 2025. Centre for Cities.
[8] ibid
[9] Social Mobility Commission. (August 2024). Spatial Agglomeration, Productivity and Inequality. Social Mobility Commission.
[10] Ofcom. (2025). Online Nation 2025. Ofcom; and Ofcom (Office of Communications) (2025) Children's Passive Online Measurement, published 26 June 2025.
[11] More in Common. (2020). Britain's Choice: Common Ground and Division in 2020s Britain. More in Common.
[12] Institute for Social and Economic Research, "We trust our neighbours less - lockdown and a decline in community cohesion" (2020), ISER

social fabric and a wide range of social outcomes.

There is now evidence of the link between:

- Social isolation and loneliness, and poor health outcomes[13]
- Social isolation and radicalisation[14]
- Social capital (particularly trust) and economic growth[15]
- Shared trust and a collective willingness to take action to ensure order and lower crime[16]
- Social connectedness across classes and income mobility[17]
- Social capital and trust and the extent of corruption, and quality of governance[18]
- The individualisation of our financial wellbeing and burgeoning welfare bills[19]

These second order effects are not only harmful in themselves, but are showing up at the door of public services. This is putting intense pressure on services, threatening performance even in their areas of competence, which in turn drives a wider lack of fiscal sustainability.

Step 3. The failure of the bureaucratic method

As public services have struggled to cope with the fallout described above, it has also become ever clearer that the bureaucratic method is ill-suited to complex issues. This is to say that the problem facing public services, and the state generally, is not just the *amount* of work, but also

[13]Nakou A, Dragioti E, Bastas NS, Zagorianakou N, Kakaidi V, Tsartsalis D, Mantzoukas S, Tatsis F, Veronese N, Solmi M, Gouva M. Loneliness, social isolation, and living alone: a comprehensive systematic review, meta-analysis, and meta-regression of mortality risks in older adults. Aging Clin Exp Res. 2025 Jan 21;37(1):29. doi: 10.1007/s40520-024-02925-1. PMID: 39836319; PMCID: PMC11750934; Lyu C, Siu K, Xu I, Osman I, Zhong J. Social Isolation Changes and Long-Term Outcomes Among Older Adults. JAMA Netw Open. 2024;7(7):e2424519. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.24519

[14]Pfundmair, M., Wood, N.R., Hales, A. & Wesselmann, E.D. (2024) How social exclusion makes radicalism flourish: A review of empirical evidence. Journal of Social Issues, 80, 341–359. doi.org/10.1111/josi.12520

[15]Xue, X., Reed, W. R., & van Aert, R. C. M. (2025). Social Capital and Economic Growth: A Meta-Analysis. Journal of Economic Surveys, 39, 1395–1432. doi.org/10.1111/joes.12660

[16]Sampson, R. J., Raudenbush, S. W., & Earls, F. (1997). "Neighborhoods and Violent Crime: A Multilevel Study of Collective Efficacy." Science, 277(5328), 918-924.

[17]Harris, T., Iyer, S., Rutter, T., Johnston, D., Wessel, M., Chi, G., Lam, P., Silva, A.S., Makinson, L., Liou, M.-C., Wang, Y., Zaman, Q. and Bailey, M. (2025) 'Social Capital in the United Kingdom: Evidence from Six Billion Friendships'. See also Chetty, R., Jackson, M.O., Kuchler, T. et al. Social capital I: measurement and associations with economic mobility. Nature 608, 108–121 (2022). Chetty, R., Jackson, M.O., Kuchler, T. et al. Social capital II: determinants of economic connectedness. Nature 608, 122–134 (2022).

[18]William Q. Judge, D. Brian McNatt, Weichu Xu, The antecedents and effects of national corruption: A meta-analysis, Journal of World Business, Volume 46, Issue 1, 2011, Pages 93-103, ISSN 1090-9516, doi.org/10.1016/j.jwb.2010.05.021.

[19]Cribb J et al (2025) The Pensions Review: final recommendations, Institute for Fiscal Studies; Office for Budget Responsibility (2025) Fiscal risks and sustainability - July 2025. Chapter 2: Long-term fiscal risks. London, OBR.

the *type* of work that needs to be done.

A growing body of evidence shows that it is costly and ineffective to apply narrowly bureaucratic methods to complex human challenges like mental ill-health, loneliness, and care. In many cases, bureaucratic responses to these challenges have proven wasteful of public money and frustrating for citizens, and at worst harmful. Around 70% of the NHS budget, for example, is now spent treating chronic conditions, with the system struggling to get beyond cycles of appointments and medications.[20] The benefit system, meanwhile, has found itself providing ever more transactional support - in the form of cash transfers, or via the incentive and sanctions regime of JobCentres - while struggling to make progress on long term unemployment or chronic mental ill-health. Meanwhile, we now have several decades of literature describing the failure of bureaucratic systems to help people with multiple complex conditions.

In response to these failures, there have been long-running efforts to reform public institutions to work better in complex, human terrain, working, for example, to make public services more holistic, asset-based, and relational. Having engaged in these efforts for many years, a growing number of public servants appreciate just how difficult it is to get big institutions to take on more human qualities. This has opened people up to the idea of investing in local and community capacity, where these qualities seem to come more naturally.

Step 4. A civic alternative

The three factors above - a worsening environment, social fallout, and the limits of bureaucracy - have been clear for a while now. As a result, many public sector leaders see that incrementalism - a better policy here, a smarter intervention there - is not an adequate strategy. Even so, many of these same leaders hit a barrier; while they know bureaucratic methods are failing, they are not clear that they have any alternative.

This speaks to a long-running weakness of the civic tradition, which is that it has struggled to translate its faith in community life into a programme for government. But over the last 15 years, and accelerating in the last five years, this weakness has started to be addressed. The burgeoning field of civic renewal shows that a civic strategy is a legitimate and practicable option.

[20]William Q. Judge, D. Brian McNatt, Weichu Xu, The antecedents and effects of national corruption: A meta-analysis, Journal of World Business, Volume 46, Issue 1, 2011, Pages 93-103, ISSN 1090-9516, doi.org/10.1016/j.jwb.2010.05.021.

Contemporary civic thinkers

Many leading thinkers have helped to develop and mature the field of contemporary civics. This work ranges from civic conceptions of democracy through to more relational and community-oriented ways of designing and running services. The following academics and practitioners have been especially influential.

Danielle Allen on democracy and justice

Allen builds the case for participatory democracy as essential to a just society in which all are given the support necessary to flourish. She proposes ”power-sharing liberalism”, a framework which emphasises inclusion, non-domination, and the distribution of civic power, in contrast to bureaucratic welfarism.

Allen, D. (2023) Justice by Means of Democracy. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. URL: press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/J/bo192735333.html

Audrey Tang on deliberative democracy

Taiwan's Digital Minister Audrey Tang pioneered large-scale deliberative democracy using tools including Polis for collective intelligence and the vTaiwan deliberation platform. Her book, Plurality, draws on these examples to demonstrate how digital technology can enable civic participation at scale, in contrast to authoritarian control and technocratic bureaucracy.

Tang, A and Weyl, E.G. (2024) Plurality: The Future of Collaborative Technology and Democracy. Washington, D.C.: RadicalxChange. URL: plurality.net

Elinor Ostrom on self-governance

Elinor Ostrom's Nobel Prize-winning research demonstrates how communities self-organise shared resources through diverse institutional arrangements. Her work shows how people can and do act in the collective interest, without top-down state control or privatisation, undermining the conventional notion of the inevitable ‘tragedy of the commons’.

Ostrom, E. (2005) Understanding Institutional Diversity. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
URL: press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691122380/understanding-

institutional-diversity

Hilary Cottam on relational care

Innovation advisor and social activist Hilary Cottam offers a critique of transactional welfare services and builds a practical case for relational approaches that develop people's capabilities and social connections, rather than deficits.

Cottam, H (2019) Radical Help. How We Can Remake The Relationships Between Us and Revolutionise The Welfare State. URL: hilarycottam.com/radical-help/

The field of contemporary civics has matured partly also thanks to programmes like Big Local. And Big Local is only one scheme in a wider movement, as we will see in Part 3 of this report, which describes the processes by which civic renewal spreads.

Suffice to say that we now have an increasingly reliable and well-codified set of methods for activating community life, more mature disciplines for doing this work, new datasets and metrics to measure social capital and civic capacity, learning and evaluation methods that suit the complexity of civic work, and new institutions to do things like hold risk and finance the purchase and refurbishment of civic spaces.

We will now turn to describing these practices in detail.

Part 2: What Big Local did

What can Big Local teach us about the practice of repairing civic life? We'll describe this practice in detail, including the role of central institutions like government departments and major foundations. We'll bring to life the work as it plays out on the ground, in neighbourhoods. And we'll grapple with the question of whether this work scales, and, if so, how.

Before we get to this, however, we need to answer some more foundational questions. What was Big Local? What did it do? And did it work?

The programme's origins

Big Local was an initiative established by the Big Lottery Fund (now the National Lottery Community Fund) and launched in 2010.[1] Nat Sloane, Chair of the Big Lottery Fund, who was appointed in 2011, outlined the programme's philosophy:

> "We know that local people are often best placed to identify what's needed in their communities, and through this scheme we are putting them at the heart of decision making."

Peter Wanless, Chief Executive of the Big Lottery Fund said at the start of the programme, that the Fund was seeking to take advantage of its independence to allow local areas security and discretion:

> "We are not constrained by those annuality rules where you have to spend money within a particular year; we are not constrained by Comprehensive Spending Review

[1]The Big Lottery Fund became the National Lottery Community Fund in 2019

periods; we are not constrained by the need to demonstrate to a minister pretty rapidly that something has happened."

Big Local set out to use those freedoms to positive effect, funding a sustained investment in civic capacity in a way that only a funder like the Big Lottery Fund could enable.

Local Trust would go on to spend £271m, supporting activities in 150 places (with an average population of 7,900 people) across England. The 150 neighbourhoods were chosen because they met two criteria:

1. Material disadvantage, measured as being 'relatively disadvantaged', with a rough proxy of being in the bottom 20% of areas on the Index of Multiple Disadvantage
2. Low social capital or civic capacity

With little data available on low civic capacity at the time, this was measured via the proxy of areas having received little funding from the public sector or organisations like the National Lottery Community Fund. The hypothesis was that a lack of civic capacity might be the reason that these areas had not applied for funding. Indeed, Big Local was prompted partly by a concern that some communities were missing out on Lottery funding; the programme built on the Fair Share Initiative (2002-2013), a £50m Fund that had targeted areas receiving less than their "fair share" of Lottery money.

Over 10-15 years, each Big Local area received £1.15m.[2] As local areas were given discretion over the pace at which they spent the funding, in practice the profile of spend varied by area. Local Trust was established as a new entity to deliver the programme, endowed with an initial grant of £217m, although the programme's final spend was higher due to return on investments. In an important innovation, it was decided that funds would be distributed to each area via a 'Locally Trusted Organisation' - an organisation nominated by the local community as a safe pair of hands to receive and distribute funding. This contrasted with a more traditional approach in which a local institution - a local charity, or, in the case of government funding, a Local Authority - acts as the primary bidder. With Big Local, the community itself would be in the driving seat.

[2]A subset of funds was distributed later, as a result of investment returns, some of which were released early in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The evidence base and our method

There have been over 100 research studies into the impact of Big Local. These range from quantitative evaluations to mixed methods and qualitative research including in-depth interviews, ethnographies and many case studies and multi-media materials. This provides a rich sense of what happened in the programme and why, as well as a robust account of the programme's likely impact. This is in addition to around 60 policy reports.

For this report, we synthesised this evidence, curating and analysing the research and policy reports, and tested the emerging themes with interviews and site visits. We also complemented our analysis of Big Local by triangulating with the evidence-base from similar programmes around the world.

Local activities

When it was decided to distribute Big Local's funding unrestricted, the first question was simple: how would local communities spend the money? Subsequent research shows that Big Local areas spent their funding in a diverse range of ways, reflecting differing local priorities, preferences, and capabilities. The choices communities made defy neat categorisation, but six types of activity stand out:

1. Events, community gatherings, and festivals, e.g. street parties, community Christmas parties, lunches and meetups
2. Money and budgeting advice and financial support, e.g. loan schemes, job clubs (45% of areas supported local people to set up new businesses, and the same proportion ran schemes supporting people's access to employment)[3]
3. Buildings, playgrounds, parks, gardens, community centres (more than two thirds of areas invested in some form of community space or asset)
4. Health and wellbeing activities, e.g. meetups to ease isolation, group therapeutic conversations, ways to keep people active

[3] Local Trust and CLES. (2020). Building Community Wealth in Neighbourhoods: Learning from the Big Local Programme. Local Trust.
https://www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk/resources/building-community-wealth-in-neighbourhoods/

5. Activities aimed at young people, e.g. football clubs, skate parks, multisport areas
6. Small grants (140 areas ran small grant schemes)

Did it work?

When it comes to evaluating the effectiveness of Big Local, we need to keep in mind the programme's underlying philosophy and theory of change.

Unlike a traditional policy intervention, Big Local was not designed to deliver a social outcome in a discrete or one-off fashion - curing loneliness, or poor mental health in the way an antibiotic cures an infection. Instead, the programme sought to cultivate the capacity of communities. This was done, in part, for instrumental reasons; it was believed that a healthy community would lead to a range of positive social outcomes. It was also done on the basis that a healthy civic life has an inherent value; to be involved in a vibrant community is meaningful and part of what life is all about.

When we ask 'did Big Local work?', we are therefore interested in a range of questions:

- Was civic life reactivated? Specifically, were people better able to identify local needs and respond to them?
- Were there consequent improvements to social outcomes?
- Did these mechanisms seem to play out as expected? Did a reactivated civic life seem to be associated with better outcomes, and if so how?
- Did people draw pleasure or meaning from participating in community life? For example, were there improvements in self-reported life satisfaction?

To answer these questions, we can draw on a range of quantitative and qualitative evidence, as well as on the direct experience of people in the 150 areas and in the central programme team at Local Trust.

Key studies and further reading

Big Local prompted a significant array of research and analysis. Below we recommend a few useful starting points for people interested in learning from this rich body of evidence.

Communities in Control: Investigating health and social outcomes of the Big Local community empowerment initiative in England

The Communities in Control (CiC) study was a seven-year, longitudinal mixed-methods evaluation which investigated the mechanisms and impact of Big Local on influencing health and social outcomes. It found that Big Local significantly increased residents' collective control over their neighbourhoods, defined as their ”power within” (confidence), ”power with” (alliance) and ”power to act”, and identified statistically significant reductions in burglaries, mental health improvements in high-spending areas, and a positive economic net benefit of at least £64M, although wellbeing gains were not evenly felt and were tempered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Popay, J., Halliday, E., Mead, R., Townsend, A., Akhter, N., Bambra, C., Barr, B., Anderson de Cuevas, R., Daras, K., Egan, M., Gravenhorst, K., Janke, K., Kasim, A.S., McGowan, V., Ponsford, R., Reynolds, J. and Whitehead, M. (2023) 'Investigating health and social outcomes of the Big Local community empowerment initiative in England: a mixed method evaluation', Public Health Research, 11(9). URL: ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK597399/

Well-placed: The impact of Big Local on the health of communities

This report uses census data (2011-2021) to show that Big Local areas experienced better health than the national average and similar non-Big Local areas. It identifies how projects influenced the social determinants of health, enabled by core conditions including agency and control, community connections, flexible funding and long-term investment.

Hashmi, I; Studdert, J and Charlesworth, L (2023). Well-Placed: The impact of Big Local on the health of communities. London: Local Trust/New Local. URL: newlocal.org.uk/publications/well-placed

'Our Bigger Story' evaluation

A nine-year longitudinal qualitative study of 15 Big Local areas, drawing on interviews, community plans, records and multimedia evidence to explore how success was understood over time and by different stakeholders, and evaluating success in relation to four broad outcomes. It found that while success varied, all areas made progress, and that areas that made the greatest progress were those that demonstrated the greatest agency and power.

URL: ourbiggerstory.com

Starting with direct measures of community activity, it is clear that Big Local prompted significant civic activity and that this began to change how communities felt. People who were involved in Big Local programmes reported feeling a stronger sense of agency and said they had more confidence in their individual and collective ability to improve their local area.[4] People reported feeling more empowered to act to improve their neighbourhoods, to forge alliances, and to assert themselves, including challenging external agencies when necessary.[5]

The evidence suggests that these effects built upon themselves in an organic way, kick-starting processes that continued, or even amplified over time. Many residents who were active in Big Local gained confidence and went on to formal roles or to set up new voluntary or community organisations.[6] 84% of Big Local partnership members felt they had learned new things, partly from others in their local area and partly from Big Local areas elsewhere.[7] Big Local partnership members reported a growing confidence in their ability to sustain the legacy of the programme, with 92% agreeing that they had the necessary support and resources and 82% feeling confident in their ability to deliver on the legacy.[8] These findings distinguish the social and participatory features of Big Local from the more transactional aspects of work done by a traditional public service - a medical prescription, for example, or a 15-minute home care visit, or a check-in at a Job Centre. Rather than treating symptoms, Big Local's primary impact was to enhance civic capacity.

4 Popay J, Halliday E, Mead R, Townsend A, Akhter N, Bambra C, et al. Investigating health and social outcomes of the Big Local community empowerment initiative in England: a mixed method evaluation. Public Health Res 2023;11(9).
5 Ibid
6 Local Trust (2023) Big Local and Civic Participation. London: Local Trust. https://www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk/resources/big-local-and-civic-participation
7 Internal document: Local Trust, Partnership members survey (2024)
8 Local Trust (2024) The Big Local survey. London: Local Trust. No longer available.

Studies also show knock-on psychological and social outcomes from these improvements in civic capacity, with important findings from a long-term seven-year evaluation carried out from 2014 to 2021. While at the population level across Big Local areas, the impacts were small, they included the following notable findings:

- In Big Local areas that spent 80% of their money by 2019-20, there were improvements in self-reported mental health, and this was more marked in areas that emphasised social activities.[9]
- There was a reduction in the rate of burglaries, which was more marked in areas that focussed on improving the local environment.[10]

Research into improved health outcomes is also supported by analysis of Census data (2011–2021) which indicated that residents in Big Local areas reported better health status than the national average and similar non-Big Local areas. This study specifically showed statistically significant increases in those reporting 'very good' health and a greater reduction in those reporting 'bad' health over the decade.[11]

When it comes to residents who were involved actively in Big Local, the findings were even more notable:

- There was an increase in mental wellbeing from 2016-2020[12]
- Those who agreed that collectively they can influence decisions in the area had significantly higher mental wellbeing scores[13]
- Those who perceived that people in the area are willing to help each other had significantly higher mental wellbeing scores

The qualitative research evidence base we drew on helps us understand the reasons for improvements in mental wellbeing in particular, suggesting that positive impacts were often directly related to:

[9] Popay J, Halliday E, Mead R, Townsend A, Akhter N, Bambra C, et al. Investigating health and social outcomes of the Big Local community empowerment initiative in England: a mixed method evaluation. Public Health Research 2023;11(9). The study showed overall 0.053 change in z-score (95% CI –0.103 to –0.002)

[10] Ibid. The study showed overall –0.054 change in z-score, 95% confidence interval –0.100 to –0.009.

[11] Hashmi, I; Studdert, J and Charlesworth, L (2023). Well-Placed: The impact of Big Local on the health of communities. London: Local Trust/New Local.

[12] Popay J, Halliday E, Mead R, Townsend A, Akhter N, Bambra C, et al. Investigating health and social outcomes of the Big Local community empowerment initiative in England: a mixed method evaluation. Public Health Research 2023;11(9). The Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being scale showed an average increase of 1.46 units on the SWEMWBS scale ,95% CI 0.14 to 2.77.

[13] Ibid The study showed a 3.36 unit increase in cohort, 95% CI 1.51 to 5.21.

- Improved social connectivity and cohesion
- Residents being more willing to help each other
- A reduction in social isolation and the encouragement of social interaction[14]

These findings are in line with Big Local's theory of change. They suggest that social outcomes improve on the back of a more active community life, which in turn appears to have been made possible by funding for activities and civic spaces (places for people to meet and build connections).

The population-level impacts of Big Local were small, but when researchers analysed the social value generated they found that it implied a sizeable return. One study estimated the programme's net financial benefit by quantifying the uplift in life satisfaction and comparing this with the programme's costs, including direct costs, via funding, and indirect costs, via unpaid time by local residents. This gave an estimated financial return of £64 million over four years in the most conservative estimates, implying a cost to benefit ratio of 1:1.3, with the likely benefits being higher.[15] These estimates have wider error ranges, but suggest that Big Local had a positive financial return under all but the most pessimistic assumptions.

How do we square the relatively small effects Big Local had on social outcomes with such a meaningful return? In part, the explanation is that, for all of its ambitions, Big Local's funding was small relative to the size of the areas it covered. The £1.15m distributed to each area over 10-15 years, covering populations averaging 7,900 people, equates to around £11.70 per person per year. For an indicative sense of scale, Big Local's funding was equivalent to 0.12% of household income in the average programme area. In proportional terms, this means Big Local funding was like adding two 5ml teaspoons to an eight-litre bucket of water. In this sense, it is striking that the programme recorded even a modest impact at population-level.

These results also speak to the resourceful nature of Big Local's delivery model. Reviewing the work done in Big Local areas, we are struck by the way local communities made the most of every penny they spent. Materials (i.e. buildings, or existing services) were repurposed, or stretched further, for example via extended opening hours. The work tapped into the latent capacities of the community, especially during Covid-19. In the words of one project worker:

[14] Hashmi, I., Studdert, J. & Charlesworth, L. (2023) Well-Placed: The impact of Big Local on the health of communities. London: New Local. The study showed a 1.09 increase in cohort, 95% CI 1.012 0 2.

[15] Popay J, Halliday E, Mead R, Townsend A, Akhter N, Bambra C, et al. Investigating health and social outcomes of the Big Local community empowerment initiative in England: a mixed method evaluation. Public Health Research 2023;11(9).

> ”It's a case of mobilising the existing resources… we always had this latent social capital and now it's coming to the fore.”

Prevention was another key feature, with an effort to get in early and help people to avoid costly spirals. In a project in Leigh, for example, play therapists and sensory workers were hired to support children's mental health and wellbeing. This had a positive impact on the children's readiness to engage with education and reduced the number of children removed from school. This ‘preventative instinct’ proved to be very efficient, in a way that is broader than the traditional bureaucratic conception of operational efficiency, which tends to focus on metrics like call and appointment times (often leading to more transactional interactions). This is a point we revisit below (see *It was preventative*, p. 44).

The costs of the wrong model

One of the more surprising results from the literature on civic and community-led methods is that working in these ways can be highly cost effective. This can seem counterintuitive when more formal, bureaucratic approaches emphasise efficiency, tracking the cost of delivery in a way that is rare in community-led work. However, a growing literature suggests that a narrow bureaucratic conception of efficiency becomes counterproductive when applied to complex, human domains. In these cases, a narrow focus on efficiency offers false reassurance i.e. a professional rushes through more appointments, speaking to more people but in a shallower way, causing waste elsewhere across the system.

This waste can take several forms:

- **Late intervention:** Public institutions tend to intervene late, long after initial conditions have developed and sometimes only at crisis point, when problems are most expensive to address
- **Fragmentation and duplication:** Multiple disconnected interventions are often funded for the same person or family, creating duplication and even contradictions
- **Treating symptoms:** Public services often focus on ameliorating the consequences of a condition rather than addressing its underlying causes
- **Blind spots:** Services are often blind to psychological, behavioural, and social

dynamics, sometimes actively worsening outcomes (e.g. consider how a spell in prison can increase the chance of future imprisonment, socialising a person into a criminal peer group; or the way a Job Centre appointment can erode a person's confidence, prolonging a period of unemployment)

- **Transaction costs:** The administrative overhead of assessments, eligibility checks, and handoffs between services can eat up time and amplify stress - especially for people with complex conditions - while adding little value
- **Knowledge loss:** Bureaucratic systems struggle to retain and apply contextual knowledge about individuals and places, repeatedly "discovering" information that communities already have at their fingertips

These drivers of waste are especially problematic because the costs of public services are driven disproportionately by people with complex conditions. In the NHS, for example, the most expensive 5% of patients account for around 50% of total spending, and similar patterns exist across social services.[16] This suggests that bureaucracies tend to fail precisely where failure is most expensive.

This all helps to explain why the instincts of community - responding in ways that are holistic, positive, relational, and so on - are often not just more human, but also more cost-effective.

Limitations of the Big Local model

Alongside the more positive impacts of Big Local, research suggests there were limitations and downsides to the work that are important to learn from. The following stand out as areas of improvement for similar efforts in future:

- The benefits of Big Local were not equally distributed across all engaged residents.[17] Those with a degree, which correlates with higher socio-economic status, and men were more

[16] Dreyer, K., Parry, W., Jayatunga, W. and Deeny, S. (2019). A Descriptive Analysis of Health Care Use by High Cost, High Need Patients in England. The Health Foundation.
[17] Terry, L. (2020) Power in our hands: An inquiry into resident-led decision making in the Big Local programme. Local Trust.

likely to report a significant improvement in mental wellbeing.[18]

- Some of the most actively involved volunteers, particularly those in leadership roles, reported stress, anxiety or emotional exhaustion from feeling a burden of responsibility, or from difficult relationships.[19] See our exploration of Big Local's approach to governance (*Growing governance*, p. 47) for more on this.
- Some local areas reported that external agencies or support workers undermined residents' ability to act by insisting on complicated processes, slowing down the work in a way that people felt was paternalistic and unnecessary.[20]

Research also points to tensions inherent to building community capacity - cases where the work takes longer, or generates friction, as communities learn to work with each other.

- Some Big Local projects experienced delays to delivery, partly as a result of challenging relationships, personality clashes and disagreements. In some cases a slower pace of delivery was exacerbated by insufficient paid staff support.[21]
- Some local partnerships seemed overly cautious, spending their funding slowly, while conducting what they felt was careful due diligence, as a way to manage risk. This led to slower decision-making, reluctance to fund new projects, and resulted in less good outcomes overall.
- Attempts to formalise governance, such as becoming a charitable incorporated organisation (CIO) or community interest company (CIC), often led to disruption, conflicts of interest and tensions.[22]

There were also external factors which limited the effectiveness of the programme, and which make the programme's eventual impact more striking:

- A decade of unprecedented cuts to public sector spending, which particularly impacted welfare benefits, and, during and after the Brexit referendum, a period of prolonged and severe political and economic uncertainty. Cuts to welfare in particular limited residents' capacity to engage in collective decision-making.[23]

[18] Popay J, Halliday E, Mead R, Townsend A, Akhter N, Bambra C, et al. Investigating health and social outcomes of the Big Local community empowerment initiative in England: a mixed method evaluation. Public Health Research 2023;11(9).
[19] Goulden, H. (2022) Leading change: Why now is the time to invest in community leadership. Local Trust.
[20] Local Trust (2021), Risk of Big Local Areas Not Spending Out. London: Local Trust, p. 7
[21] ibid, p. 3
[22] Local Trust (2022) Big Local partnerships and the public sector: Scoping paper. Local Trust.
[23] Community Development Foundation (2015) Early learning from Big Local. London: Local Trust

- The Covid-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the programme. For example, an early increase in mental wellbeing for engaged residents by 2018 was not maintained by 2020, after the pandemic had begun.[24]

These external factors were mitigated to a degree by Big Local's long-term approach - with at least 10 years of funding committed, local areas were able to adapt. However, the programme design could not avoid the impacts of uncertainty entirely. Material realities - especially deepening poverty and the decline of public sector capacity - are likely to have dampened Big Local's eventual outcomes.

Personal stories

Perhaps the best way to get an idea of Big Local's effects and causal mechanisms is to put the aggregate studies to one side and read some of the programme's personal stories. We see, in case after case, people whose lives were changed by Big Local; the circumstances of these cases gives us insight into why the overall programme had the impact it did. To give three typical examples:

- Vicky Williamson was struggling with severe depression, anxiety and extreme social withdrawal, when she was invited into the Big Local space at Northwood Together, in Kirby, Merseyside, for a cup of tea. She started to spend time there, began volunteering and slowly sought help for her mental health challenges. She became a board member of the partnership and secured a job as a teaching assistant. She later said:
  "Thank you to them for believing in me, even when I didn't believe in myself. A quick chat and a cup of tea changed everything."[25]
- Becky Allen grew up in an unstable and traumatic environment, experiencing homelessness, drug and alcohol addiction, and serious mental and physical ill-health. When she first moved to Whitleigh, on the outskirts of Plymouth, she was unwell, isolated and mistrustful. A Big Local worker helped her, without deadlines or pressure, and as she regained confidence she developed an idea for a community circus. She started to work on the project, secured funding and set up a community interest company, building a sense of agency and identity. She moved into sustained recovery, no longer marginalised in the

[24]McCabe, A., Wilson, M., Macmillan, R. and Ellis Paine, A. (2021) Now they see us: Communities responding to COVID-19. Report from the second research phase. Local Trust.
https://www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk/resources/now-they-see-us

[25]Local Trust (2024), Voices of Big Local, Local Trust

community but working actively to shape it.[26]

- John was a 56-year-old single parent with two kids in Mablethorpe, a quiet seaside town between Grimsby and Skegness, when he came into contact with Big Local. He was suffering from depression, receiving regular therapy through the council when one day he walked into the ‘men’s shed’, a community workshop. New to woodwork, John started by making a toybox for his son.

  “I’ve got a lot out of it, my self-belief is a lot better than it was, and it gave me something to work towards, something to do”. He has since been signed off from therapy. “Everything’s changed”, he says. “Yes, I’m still on medication for depression, but now I can get up in the morning.”[27]

For these individuals and others, Big Local proved life-changing. This was impactful not just for the individuals themselves, but for public institutions. Given the lifetime costs of supporting people with complex conditions, a small number of impacts like these can offset the costs of an entire local programme. We see how this could feed through into modest population-level impacts, while generating a meaningful overall return.

Conclusion

All in all, we can say that Big Local was effective. But it is important to keep in mind not just Big Local’s final outcomes, but the way these outcomes were reached - the 'how' of Big Local. The programme worked by raising the capacity of communities, and this is arguably the more important finding. This was not an ‘intervention’ delivering an outcome, it was renewed civic capacity in action. Big Local did not just work. It worked in a way that was consistent with the programme’s philosophy. It is the 'how' of Big Local that is the subject of the next section.

[26] Local Trust (2024), Voices of Big Local, Local Trust
[27] Tickle L (2020) The Courage to Succeed: Taking action to make a change. Local Trust

Part 3: How Big Local did it

Big Local was an experiment, which means its value was partly in learning. So what does the programme and its accompanying evidence-base tell us about the practice of restoring social capital? Can we draw lessons from Big Local for future efforts to revitalise civic life? If we were to undertake a similar programme again today, could we make it more effective? And where might a bigger and better version of Big Local conceivably get us? As the government embarks on its Pride in Place initiative these questions could not be more relevant.

Rewilding civic life

Many reports on Big Local have been published that go into elements of the programme in far more detail than we are able to here. Our goal, however, has been to draw out the big insights from the literature, and to see if we can make sense of an often complicated and varied picture.

As we tried to understand the craft of Big Local, we found it helpful to think of the work of civic renewal as analogous to rewilding in environmentalism. Rewilding is an approach to conservation that focuses on restoring natural processes and allowing ecosystems to thrive, with fewer synthetic interventions. Rather than trying to pre-define what good looks like, rewilding lets nature take the lead.

The critical shift with rewilding is a step back from intensive control, in order to create space for the ecological processes that would naturally shape an environment. At the same time, rewilding does not do this by abandoning land. Instead, it recognises that when an area is depleted, and habitats are degraded and certain processes have ceased to function, a healthy ecosystem requires a degree of stewardship.

Does rewilding work?

There are now many examples from across the world of rewilding in practice. The Knepp Estate in Sussex is a 3,500 acre estate which was once intensively farmed, but with soil that didn't lend itself to agriculture. In 2000 its owners, conservationist Isabella Tree and Sir Charlie Burrell, gave the land over to restoration with the hope that this would provide an alternative business model.

The owners introduced free-roaming cattle, ponies, pigs and deer, restored the river to reintroduce natural flooding, and undertook minimal intervention, allowing nature to lead the way.

Over that time, a large and diverse range of wildlife has returned to the estate. There has been a 40.9% increase in areas with trees, with numerous rare species including critically endangered nightingales and turtle doves, all five of the UK's resident species of owls, and a number of rare insect species.[1]

The estate was able to support a diverse set of income streams, including nature tourism, a wild meat business, property rental and a solar farm, all of which have resulted in a profit that exceeds the average for England farms, and employs 3.5 times as many people as prior to rewilding.[2]

Further reading:

Isabella Tree, "Wilding: The Return of Nature to a British Farm" (Picador, 2018)

Isabella Tree & Charlie Burrell, "The Book of Wilding: A Practical Guide to Rewilding Big and Small" (2023) URL: knepp.co.uk/rewilding/wildlife-successes/

Over the last three decades, rewilding has grown into a distinct strategy in conservation. The idea was formalised by Michael Soulé and Reed Noss in 1998, and has since become evermore well-evidenced and sophisticated.[3] Organisations like Rewilding Europe (founded in

[1]ZSL, Understanding impacts of long-standing UK rewilding project: Space Observation of Knepp Estate Nature Recovery zsl.org/what-we-do/projects/space-observation-of-knepp-estate-nature-recovery. London: ZSL. Accessed 16.01.2026

[2]Smith B (2024) Talk on the Wild Side: Rewilding at the Knepp Estate. Maidstone: Kent Wildlife Trust. kentwildlifetrust.org.uk/blog/rewilding-at-knepp-estate

[3]"Soulé, M.E. and Noss, R. (1998). Rewilding and Biodiversity: Complementary Goals for Continental Conservation. Wild Earth, 8(3), 18-28.See also Svenning et al.'s 2016 definition of"trophic rewilding" in PNAS (113: 898-906)

2011) and Rewilding Britain (2015) have run large scale experiments, and the practice has now been recognised formally by the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Guidelines for Rewilding (2025). As the organisation that maintains critical assets like the world's lists of endangered species, the IUCN's endorsement has embedded rewilding as a recognised approach in global conservation policy.[4]

There are a number of similarities between rewilding and civic renewal. Both are methods for teasing out and spreading processes that are ultimately organic and locally-rooted. The two fields also share certain approaches - think, for example, of the emphasis on habitats, both in natural rewilding projects and in civics (e.g. places where civic life thrives, like libraries). But perhaps most of all, we notice how the two fields bring a similar quality of touch and attention. The work is not controlling - rewilding resists the temptation to meddle, making space for organic processes, unlike farming - or an overbearing bureaucracy. At the same time, it is not negligent; it does not abandon depleted land, just as civic rewilding would never abandon a community. Its perspective is one of enabling, or stewardship.

Where does this analogy of rewilding take us? We find that it helps to make sense of the plethora of evidence from programmes like Big Local. Specifically, it helped us see the work of civic renewal in three distinct and complementary phases, which loosely correspond to the way Big Local has matured over its 15 years of life. The three phases are:

1. **Protecting space:** This describes the way Big Local and Local Trust were set up and the enabling way in which the programme went about things. The primary goal was to protect space for local communities to do what they felt was needed, so that local residents could follow their instincts. We might think of this as the phase in rewilding projects when the scope of the project is decided, and the land is protected.
2. **The community instinct:** This describes the work that happened locally in the protected space. It includes the diverse activities that communities undertook, and the social processes through which this work was done. This work is necessarily messy but it has common qualities. In rewilding terms, civic life grows organically, following its path, without external impositions.
3. **Deepening and spreading:** This is the work that started to develop as Big Local and the wider movement for community-led development matured. This phase is more systemic; it is about codifying, sharing learning, and spreading and adapting methods. It is where the work scales, but in locally relevant ways.

[4] See Carver et al.'s "Guiding principles for rewilding" (Conservation Biology 35(6): 1882-1893, 2021), the EU Nature Restoration Law (2024)

Below we unpack each of these phases in turn.

Phase 1: Protecting space

Local Trust helped to create the conditions for civic capacity to grow in the only way it can - which is organically in communities. When Big Local started, this was a relatively new proposition. At first, the programme therefore took a fairly minimalist approach, working hard to 'do no harm'. This meant:

- **Not imposing:** Local Trust was independent from National Lottery Community Fund, which in turn was arm's length from government. This provided vital protection from the system's controlling instincts.[5] The funding itself was then handed down to local areas largely unrestricted via Locally Trusted Organisations. This gave local communities control and ownership of funding and decisions in a meaningful way.
- **Being long term:** a short-term programme might have had to deliver through existing formal structures and institutions, prioritising finishing a few projects over building local capacity and ownership. The long-term nature of Big Local allowed places to accrue social capital by doing the work. They were able to follow their instincts, make mistakes and move on to the next idea without fear of losing funding.
- **Insisting on community leadership:** If Big Local insisted on one thing, it was true community leadership. This did not mean predetermining governance but asserting a 51% principle. This meant communities had overall control.

We can see how this first phase required a mix of humility and leadership. The work of protecting space did not mean simply vacating the space so that communities can step into it. Local Trust was supportive; it was there on the end of the phone if needed. Indeed, at times, determined leadership was required to hold the space open for communities, including sometimes protecting the space from local institutions. As Peter Wanless explained, the Big Lottery Fund used its independence from government to set up a Trust to run a programme that delegated power directly to neighbourhoods.

[5] As one participant reported, "In most cases the first sign of something going wrong and the government … or the local authority stepped in or usually both … because … they just couldn't bear any form of scandal or failure or whatever. The difference with Big Local is that the Big Lottery Fund have set this up, so they are not government." Popay J, Halliday E, Mead R, Townsend A, Akhter N, Bambra C, et al. Investigating health and social outcomes of the Big Local community empowerment initiative in England: a mixed method evaluation. Public Health Research 2023;11(9), p.33.

Holding space

There is now a well-developed body of practices that can be used to 'hold space' or make a 'container' for difficult conversations. Nancy Kline's *Thinking Environment* explores how to create conditions for group thinking, without directing the outcome. These methods have been shown to be effective for solving complex problems - hearing from diverse voices and allowing insight to emerge through synthesis, much as insights emerged from the Big Local programme.[6]

Edwin Friedman's related concept of 'non-anxious presence' describes a leader or steward who is able to stay calm, clear and connected to a system, without trying to control its outcomes. This approach sees leadership as a regulated presence - a way leaders can act to create the conditions for a group of people to self-organise and develop their own capacity to solve problems. The leader's role is to maintain the container and stay attentive to social dynamics, and help the group to make sense of the insights that are emerging.[7]

By the end of Big Local, a lot had been learned, and Local Trust and the wider sector were able to take a more active approach. We will return to these lessons in Phase 3, as they are highly relevant to th e UK's Pride in Place investment and wider plans for a neighbourhood healthcare service. First, though, let's look at the local work that Big Local enabled.

Phase 2: The community instinct

If you spend time with people doing civic and community work, you'll soon hear complaints about the constraints they face; short-term funding, pre-specified demands from Whitehall or major foundations, and onerous and pointless reporting requirements. For once, Big Local insisted on none of this, freeing local people to work how they wanted. So what did this freedom enable?

As we saw in *Local activities* (p. 25), the activities that were enabled by Big Local were ex-

[6] Kline, N (2002). Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind. London: Cassell.
[7] Friedman E (2007) A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix. New York: Seabury Books.

ceptionally diverse, reflecting the context of each local area. However, in our review of the literature we find five common qualities in the work that took place.

It was holistic

The organising logic of Big Local projects was people and places, not services or functional silos. Rather than mirroring the structures of local and national institutions, which tend to treat each person as a series of separate problems, Big Local areas created activities for the whole person. There were drop-ins at community centres, lunch clubs, parent and baby groups, and community gardens. The focus was on experiences that people could participate in, rather than services or interventions created to cure a discrete problem.

Big Local areas rarely ran 'services' in a traditional sense - certainly not in a one-to-one sense. More often they invited professionals into community events and spaces. Better Communities Bradford is a prime example, where residents held weekly sewing classes, which a therapist was then invited to join.[8] A community manager at another Big Local project described the goal as running "something between a service and a club".

The consistent pattern is that community - relationships, welcoming spaces, enjoyable activities - came first, and support from professionals and services came in behind, by invitation. This flipped the traditional bureaucratic logic of silos, making Big Local feel less daunting and more approachable.

It was relational

As Big Local was premised on a community coming together to take action, it relied on relationships, both those already existing and those stimulated by the initiative. Events, clubs, peer support groups, sports and other activities enabled people to make new connections and deepen existing friendships. In a sense the primary subject of the work wasn't individual people, but the relationships between them.

As well as the social side of the work, communities also made decisions in relational ways. People were given time to explore their needs and ambitions, to listen to each other and unpack what was happening in their local area. Because funding and decision-making powers were held locally, these conversations delivered real agency, and relationships had to strengthen to

[8] Studdert J, Hashmi I and Charlesworth L (2023) Well-Placed: The impact of Big Local on the health of communities. London: New Local, p. 67

bear this responsibility. Mutual trust was key, and accrued through both the social and formal aspects of Big Local activities and governance.

Relationships were not always easy, either between local people or between communities and local institutions. Some people felt more able to participate than others, but this wasn't a simple case of 'the usual suspects' dominating. One project lead, born and raised on the local estate, had fought off affluent locals proposing an arts centre, which she felt was out of touch ("a champagne idea for a lemonade neighbourhood"); another community manager said he enjoyed "freedom from middle-class do gooders", which meant he was able to listen to locals. All in all, the ethos was informal and welcoming. This was not a world of committees and gatekeepers.

It was resourceful

A notable quality of Big Local is the resourceful nature of the work. In traditional bureaucracies, there is often an instinct to solve problems from scratch, reviewing the evidence-base and designing a policy or an intervention. This makes little use of existing capacity and can even hobble existing initiatives by cutting across them, or forcing them to adapt to a new delivery model. For instance, a new initiative will seek a 'programme budget' which will include millions of pounds for a central team, local delivery professionals, and a standalone evaluation. This contrasts with the work that happened in Big Local, which more often started by asking, what strengths do we have as a community that we could leverage, link together, and build on?

Big Local areas were characterised by resourcefulness. Because local communities were ambitious, but their budgets were small in the grand scheme of things, they could pay for connective tissue, catalyse work with seed funding, or refurbish a building, but rarely could they fund a 'new build' space or service. This meant working with existing materials and assets: an empty building reopened, a church or school's opening hours extended to offer a warm space, existing charities connected. It also meant running with people's feelings and behaviours and tapping into pride in a local football club, or offering an advice drop-in at a supermarket, for residents to pop into during the weekly shop.

Big Local projects made the most of physical as well as relational assets. Many local projects acquired or gained management rights over local buildings or land, such as community centres and halls, green spaces, and sports facilities. These physical spaces became focal points and were both a source of pride as a community-owned asset and a space for activities. These become places for people to meet and connections to form.

The resourcefulness of Big Local also applied to relationships, with projects weaving people into the community, or making links to support services. It meant the work focused less on providing individual services, and more on building links between them. Big Local areas ended up with a tighter mesh of supportive institutions, woven into the social fabric. The work also made inventive and mixed uses of space, bringing back footfall and creating eyes on the street, which in turn tackled crime hotspots. The work tended to strengthen institutions rather than add new ones.

Finally, this resourceful mindset extended to the way Big Local helped people, drawing on their aspirations, skills, and assets. Many Big Local areas set up clubs for sharing and swapping (e.g.exchanges for children's toys and clothes, tool libraries, book swaps, peer-learning and knowledge-swaps).[9] People reported a rising sense of self-worth as they helped with a community kitchen, or garden. Others lent neighbours support, and even household items, and the favour was later repaid, growing trust. In this way, the work directly repaired the bonds of social capital.

It was positive

A spirit of resourcefulness ties in with another feature of the community instinct; the work was surprisingly positive. Projects often started by asking: 'what do we like about this community?', or 'what are our hopes for the future?'. This tapped into a sense of pride and purpose; at its best, it helped people to turn a sense of anger and frustration into a desire to help to make things better.

Starting from a positive place is a core theme of a discipline now known as asset-based community development ('start with what's strong, not what's wrong'). On an individual level, this helps people to build a positive self-image, rather than demoralising them by making them repeat a list of their problems, as tends to happen in a Job Centre, or GP surgery. An asset-based approach starts with a person's hopes, dreams and talents, giving them a sense of what's possible. Instead of just treating symptoms (making life less bad), it acts in service of something more joyful and aspirational.

This differs from top-down, bureaucratic programmes, which tend to make asset-based approaches difficult. Funding often comes with tight eligibility requirements, which means local services have to ask long lists of questions to determine if people are eligible to access the

[9] Studdert J, Hashmi I and Charlesworth L (2023) Well-Placed: The impact of Big Local on the health of communities. London: New Local, p. 34

service. In Big Local, the lack of eligibility rules, and of reporting requirements, freed people to have more positive conversations. So the space created by Big Local made a more positive approach possible.

In this way, many Big Local projects connected to an important source of energy that is often overlooked by more paternalistic or pathologising programmes. A recurring finding in the literature is that if you ask people what they think of their communities, even in materially-deprived places, people have a positive view of the place they live. As one local resident we interviewed put it: "people talk down this area, but I won't have it; I grew up here and I had a wonderful childhood". By foregrounding the voice of residents, Big Local projects were able to tap into local pride, without glossing over local challenges.

We see this sense of positivity again and again in accounts of Big Local activities. Read the accounts of local projects and you will hear little about the crises that dominate national discourse; you will hear more about pocket parks, outdoor gyms, knitting classes, and community gardens. This is not to say that the crises weren't present, but that they didn't frame the work that took place. When you contrast this with the traditional delivery methods of government - a Job Centre, a parenting intervention, a medical treatment - you notice there is an unusual sense of humanity and even humour to the work.

Another interesting pattern we see throughout Big Local, and in community-led development generally, is the indirect or oblique nature of the work. Bureaucracy tends to approach problems in a literal way, i.e. if loneliness is a problem, it designs a loneliness intervention. Communities do things less directly; the answer to loneliness might be cooking together, or swapping and fixing tools, or live comedy. The results are consistent with the wider evidence on obliquity; taking an indirect approach is often, counterintuitively, more effective.[10]

It was preventative

For decades people have lamented the way governments struggle to invest in prevention. This tendency runs deep into the bureaucratic instinct, which sees the world as problems to be ameliorated, and therefore focuses on symptoms. It also speaks to an inherent challenge of governing, which is that once you're responsible for acute or crisis services (e.g. treating heart attacks, or bacterial infections), it is very hard to find money for important but non-urgent tasks like investing in healthy environments, or in the long-term management of chronic health conditions.

[10] Kay, J. (2010) *Obliquity: why our goals are best achieved indirectly*. London: Profile Books.

The work done through Big Local seemed to escape this predicament. Time and again, the instinct was to prevent. When we synthetised case studies and firsthand accounts from Big Local areas, we found that this was partly because, to a community, it is the causes of problems that are salient. Consider ill-health, for example; what stands out to a community is poor transport, a lack of parks, and a lack of healthy food options. By contrast, a senior NHS decision-maker will find the most salient challenge to be the people at the door needing treatment. This helps to explain why it has been so difficult to shift public services to prevention. And it suggests that a complementary strategy could be to boost capacity in places where prevention comes naturally - in local communities.

An alternative to the bureaucratic instinct

These five themes - holistic, relational, resourceful, positive, and preventative - show how communities respond to societal challenges when they have the resources, power, and freedom to do so.

It is striking that these are almost precisely opposite to the archetypal qualities of a bureaucracy - with its tendency to pathologise, to intervene late and in transactional ways, to focus on narrow efficiency metrics, and to deliver services through silos. Public sector reformers have tried for years to shift the system away from these bureaucratic qualities, pursuing initiatives to make public services more asset-based, holistic, and relational. What we see here is that communities don't have to strain so hard to achieve these qualities - to a community, they come more naturally.

Case study: Northwood Big Local, Shape Shifters

Northwood Big Local, Shape Shifters The neighbourhood of Northwood in Kirby, Merseyside, identified key concerns around mental health, physical health and nutrition, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. They saw that mental health challenges often related to weight gain, poor self-esteem, poor nutrition, inadequate housing, challenging relationships, and existing health conditions. By looking at these challenges in a holistic way, they were able to understand how they connected together.

In response, they developed 'Shape Shifters', a six-month programme which provides

participants with gym passes, weekly weigh-ins and talks on nutrition and lifestyle. The overall approach is preventative, aiming to tackle the root causes of poor mental and physical health before they become acute and require formal medical intervention.

Participants apply to be part of the programme, and those who are successful receive daily check-ins from team leaders who provide encouragement and support, and also peer support from other participants through a shared Facebook page. This relational approach recognises that collective support and shared trust is critical to bringing about individual and collective social change.

The project takes advantage of existing local physical and social infrastructure in a resourceful way, including local gym memberships and use of existing social media platforms, delivering good outcomes without big overheads.

The initiative took a positive approach, tapping into and boosting participants' sense of efficacy and people's hopes for the future. The first cohort achieved significant improvements to their physical health, with 24 participants in excess of 500lbs in weight in total, and reporting reductions in cholesterol and reduced risk of diabetes. But organisers felt the biggest takeaway was the improved confidence and self-worth of all those who took part.

As one participant shared, *"I saw so many people start the first day on the programme and they'd be quiet and not speak to anyone. We always made it fun and would have a giggle together and a cry if we needed it. By the end, they'd be going out and socialising with each other with their confidence sky high. People's mental health and overall wellbeing really improved."*[11]

The initial success of the programme resulted in external support from the Lviv Housing Group and Volair Kirkby to allow the work to continue.[12]

[11] Local Trust (2024), Voices of Big Local, Local Trust
[12] Studdert J, Hashmi I and Charlesworth L (2023) Well-Placed: The impact of Big Local on the health of communities. London: New Local, p. 40 - 43

Growing governance as a local capability

When it came to governance, Big Local's approach was unusual. Rather than imposing a model from above, local areas were given discretion to develop their own approach; the only requirement was that governance should put the community in control.

This approach reflected a belief that governance is itself an important capability for local communities to cultivate, and it led to one of Big Local's most powerful legacies. It flipped the 'governance-first' approach that is typical in the public sector, in which governance is decided upfront (designed to look neat on paper) and charged with steering the work. With Big Local, it was the opposite: the work came first, and governance was grown like trellis around it, often remaining in place, to support more work in future.[13]

This approach had a number of important implications. It meant that governance:

- Did not cut across existing local relationships and networks of trust, but worked with these relationships, strengthening them and leveraging them in service of the work
- Was not performative, and developed to be helpful, rather than as roles people were told to play, or to satisfy external requirements
- Was adaptive; if governance wasn't serving the work, people could change it
- Was a learned capability; people practiced governance and got better at it
- Was more relational than is typical; the most successful local partnerships started by building trust and a sense of shared endeavour between people, rather than with the more formal theatre of meetings and minutes
- Was tailored to the work; as governance was built in situ, like a temporary brace, it could be custom-designed to compensate for local weaknesses (e.g. making up for a lack of skills in a certain area, or correcting for a missing institutional relationship)

Tellingly, the messiness of this approach - unlike the neat governance diagrams drawn in Whitehall - proved to be a strength. Local areas worked out approaches that suited them; how much to deliver directly, and how much to commission; or whether to become a legal entity, or remain informal and work through other organizations. Local areas also worked through questions such as 'Who counts as a local 'resident'?, or 'How should we involve councillors?',

[13]With thanks to John V Willshire for suggesting the metaphor of a 'trellis', as opposed to the more rigid notion of a scaffold.

again tailoring their approach to their context. Local Trust provided guidance on managing conflict, which stressed that "differences of opinion are usually a good thing".[14] This all fits the theories of Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom, who spent decades researching self-governance (see box below).

There were also, however, downsides to this more organic approach to governance. Relationships were often strained and many Big Local areas saw personal fallouts and stress for project leaders. Some required mediation. People were using new muscles, and sometimes those muscles were strained. Some local partnership members who found this model of governance difficult would go on to conclude that navigating differences was part of the learning process. Others have argued that mediation can itself prove to be a positive and even transformative experience, helping a community to name and overcome tensions and develop deeper mutual understanding.[15]

By the end of Big Local, key figures in the programme came to think that building local governance capacity was one of the most important outcomes of the work.[16]

Complexity and adaptive systems

As governments have struggled in the face of complex problems, there has been growing interest in insights from complexity theory and systems theory. This literature helps us understand systems in which outcomes emerge from the interactions between components, rather than being predictable from initial conditions. A recurring theme in this work is the resilience and adaptability of decentralised systems, in which decisions do not take place at the centre, but are dispersed at the periphery. See, for example, the following further reading.

Systems Thinking: Donella Meadows offers ways to understand how complex sys-

[14] Local Trust (2015) *Differences of opinion and conflicts within a Big Local partnership*.
[15] We are grateful to Dominika Noworolska for raising this point in response to our Working Paper.
[16] "Most importantly, through the work that they have commissioned and delivered, residents of Big Local areas have collectively developed the skills, networks and confidence to successfully lead their areas into the future." Matt Leach, Chief Executive, Local Trust. Lent A, Studdert J and Walker T (2019). Community Commissioning: Shaping Public Services through People Power. London: NLGN / Local Trust, p.5. newlocal.org.uk/publications/community-commissioning-shaping-public-services-through-people-power/

tems behave, and how we can intervene to shape them. Her concept of ”leverage points” identifies where small shifts in a system can lead to big changes of outcome, and she uses ideas like feedback loops, delays, and system boundaries to explain why more traditional interventions often fail. Meadows argues that the most powerful leverage often comes not from changing a parameter value, or pulling a lever, but from changing paradigms, incentives, and power structures.

Meadows, D H (2008). Thinking in Systems: A Primer. London: Earthscan. chelseagreen.com/product/thinking-in-systems/

Polycentric governance: Elinor Ostrom built a powerful body of evidence over decades on the potential for self-governance. She showed that local communities can successfully self-govern common-pool resources, developing their own norms and institutions without the need for top-down state control or privatisation.

Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the Commons*. Cambridge University Press. doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511807763

Self-organisation: Steven Johnson shows how complex adaptive behaviour emerges from simple local interactions in systems like ant colonies, cities, and software, without a central controller. Agents follow simple rules based on local information, and together this amounts to sophisticated collective problem-solving.

Johnson, S. (2001). *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities and Software*. New York: Scribner.

penguin.co.uk/books/25647/emergence-by-steven-johnson/9780140287752

Cybernetics: Stafford Beer’s Viable System Model (1970s) shows how stable organisations have distributed sensing and decision-making capacities, operating at multiple levels, connected by feedback loops. He argued that systems need “requisite variety” - the capacity to respond must exceed the complexity of the environment, hence the need for local autonomy. Dan Davies uses Beer’s approach to understand the failures of top-down bureaucracies. He shows how centralised systems create “unaccount-ability” by severing feedback loops between decisions and their consequences, and argues for institutional designs that can restore requisite variety through distributed decision-making.

Beer, S. (1974). Designing Freedom. New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons.

Davies, D. (2024). The Unaccountability Machine: Why Big Systems Make Terrible Decisions - and How The World Lost its Mind. London: Profile Books. profilebooks.com/work/the-unaccountability-machine/

Phase 3: Deepening and spreading

The third phase of civic renewal is in many ways the most consequential. It is where Big Local became more than just a collection of local projects, and grew into something closer to a movement, or what we describe as a field. We picture this phase as like drops of ink spreading on blotting paper; the colour deepens in each local area, and the work starts to spread beyond that area, and to connect to others. An alternative metaphor is the way a plant's root system functions (See box). In the later years of Big Local, these processes gave us a better answer to a question people often ask when they hear about an impressive community initiative: 'that sounds good, but does it scale?'

Root system architecture: Learning from nature

When we published this report as a Working Paper, we received lots of positive feedback on the idea that community-led development 'spreads rather than scales'. This metaphor resonated with practitioners, who have often struggled with funders or public institutions who interpret 'scaling' as replication, i.e. the idea that we need to find out 'what works' in one local area, and then 'roll it out' to other areas.

As we studied the work of Big Local and similar programmes, it soon became clear that the work does not scale in this mechanistic sense, but that it does still spread - only in more organic ways. A project might self-seed in other areas when someone sees it and feels inspired to copy it. Or a new method might be shared through a network of practitioners, meeting up and learning from each other.

As the work of civic renewal matures in coming years, these processes of 'spreading' will become more important. We could think of this by analogy with root system architecture, which refers to the spatial layout of a plant's roots. Plants develop different root architectures depending on their environments. Some grow with deep central tap roots, others with wide shallow networks. Rhizome systems like bamboo or ginger spread horizontally underground, creating a distributed network, and they concentrate resources and regenerative capacity at nodes in the network. These nodes store energy, sense local conditions, and can generate new growth. If the plant is destroyed above ground, the underground nodes allow it to regenerate.

For civic capacity, we are likely to want a mix of these features - broad networks, like communities of practice, and distributed leadership, with concentrated nodes. Perhaps these nodes could be physical and social hubs, or centres of expertise, where relationships can deepen, resources can be pooled, and regeneration can happen if a project in one area closes due to lack of funding.

We've found that reading into these ecological analogies can provide inspiration.

- Fitter, A H (1987) "An architectural approach to the comparative ecology of plant root systems". *New Phytologist, 106: 61-77. doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8137.1987.tb04683.x*
- Lynch, J P (1995) "Root Architecture and Plant Productivity" *Plant Physiology* Volume 109, Issue 1, September 1995, Pages 7–13, doi.org/10.1104/pp.109.1.7

Spreading within Big Local

The evidence from Big Local helps us see why some projects established themselves and spread better than others. One common feature of successful local projects was the confidence to take risks and spend money early. By contrast, local partnerships that were risk-averse - extensively debating small commitments; and limiting themselves to small grants programmes and not bigger, more innovative projects - tended to perform more poorly.[17] One member of the Kingsbrook and Cauldwell partnership argued that backing innovative ideas

[17] Local Trust (2021) Risk of Big Local areas not spending out. Research Team Briefing #6. London: Local Trust. https://www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk/resources/areas-at-risk-of-not-spending-out

was one of their core aims: "We should be able to take a punt, life is full of punts!"[18]

Taking risks didn't always mean going big. Many successful projects started with quick, small wins which raised people's confidence and sense of shared identity. People often built confidence early, and then took formal roles later, with around 58% of partnership members surveyed in 2022 later taking other roles in the community. Around 5% of members went on to become local councillors.[19] This offered another way for the work to spread; people learned skills like active listening and consensus-building, and then used these skills in other spheres, roles, and contexts.[20]

The ability to forge alliances was also key. The most successful partnerships collaborated with local authorities, or anchor institutions like health agencies, or schools.[21] In this way, a spirit of collaboration spread across and beyond Big Local areas.[22] Partnerships were used to bring in additional resources, leveraging significant additional financial and in-kind resources beyond the core Big Local grant.[23]

Over time, Big Local formed a network of leaders, sharing knowledge and expertise. Being part of this network also provided a source of emotional support, protecting people from burnout.[24] Within local areas, relationships often centred around a physical space. Community centres, cafes or other repurposed buildings became a symbol of the work and a place for relationships to form.[25] A building often also served as an entry point; people came first as visitors, and then became volunteers, and then moved into leadership roles.[26]

[18]Davis, H. et al. (2022) Residents in control: Community grants in Big Local areas. London: IVAR / Local Trust. P. 11. (No longer available.)

[19]Local Trust (2023). Big Local and civic participation. London: Local Trust (No longer available.)

[20]Baker, L et al (2024). Spheres of community influence: Understanding the long-term impact of the Community Leadership Academy. London: Local Trust / Just Ideas. https://www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk/resources/spheres-of-community-influence

[21]Leila B, Jochum V, Garforth H and Usher R (2022). Big Local relationships with public agencies: Research report. London: Local Trust / Just Ideas. https://www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk/resources/big-local-relationships-with-public-agencies

[22]Wood, J. et al. (2022) Volunteering and Big Local: Who volunteers in Big Local. London: Local Trust/ERS. https://www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk/resources/who-volunteers-in-big-local-communities

[23]Resources for Change and Rocket Science (2017) *Big Local – More than just the £1 million Summary of research on additional resources in Big Local.* London: Local Trust. https://www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk/resources/additional-resources-more-than-just-the-million

[24]Terry, V., Usher, R., Rooney, K., Buckley, E and Garforth, H. (2023) Building confidence in community leadership. London: Local Trust, Institute for Voluntary Action Research and Just Ideas

[25]Wood, J. et al. (2022) Volunteering and Big Local: Who volunteers in Big Local. London: Local Trust/ERS, p. 24 See above.

[26]Ibid. p. 28

Case study: Arches Local, Chatham

Arches Local, a Big Local project in Chatham, Medway, shows how the community instinct can deepen over time and spread across the neighbourhood and beyond.

Chatham is a culturally diverse area with an industrial history, associated with the dockyards, which created employment and social cohesion historically, but left a void after their closure in 1984. This resulted in poverty - by 2019 the area was among the most deprived in England - and limited opportunities, with a transient population without a strong sense of cohesion.[27] Community members reflected on their experience living in a place that has things "done to" it, rather than "done with" it.

At the start of Big Local, Arches Local gathered residents' views on local priorities. They identified five themes, on social investment, urban greening, neighbourhood planning, getting more active, and community engagement. A range of initiatives emerged, including weekly coffee mornings, Facebook hangouts, street art programmes, an urban tree planting project which planted more than 70 street trees, and Fit and Fed, a programme which provided hot lunches and physical and creative activities for local children during the holidays.

These initial programmes built a sense of local belonging, pride and confidence:

> *"We have seen from the people who volunteer, particularly with our Fit and Fed programme, that they are more likely to feel they belong in their area and those who take part in activities are more likely to enjoy stronger social links with other people."*[28]

By starting small and building from there, the partnership built the capacity, skills, knowledge and confidence to take on bigger projects, deepening the community's capacity. They built strong relationships with local institutions and attracted additional funding. This allowed the local partnership to set up a Neighbourhood Forum, which brought together more than 2,000 people to develop a shared vision for their local area and to inform local policy.

Jackson Fraser-Hague initially became involved as a volunteer on a one-off street art project, and then became more deeply involved, setting up the Neighbourhood Forum and later becoming Chair. He reflected how setting up the forum was a complex pro-

cess, enabled by the capacity that had already been built, and catalysed by stability and the 'anchor' of Big Local funding:

> *"For me… Big Local has underpinned everything the forum has done. Without that it would never have got here. Staffing capacity, consultant fees, venue spaces, insurances. When I speak to other areas in Medway who approach us and say they are interested in making a neighbourhood plan, [I warn them that] you need a permanent anchor. Because it is all very daunting, unless you have that permanent support base."*[29]

In November 2022 Arches Local became a Community Interest Company, allowing it to build on the partnership's success beyond Big Local. They are continuing to lead and coordinate initiatives to improve outdoor spaces, support physical and mental wellbeing, and to create opportunities for community engagement, and provide support and guidance to other neighbourhood groups beyond Medway, spreading their insight and knowledge beyond the local area.

Chatham shows how the power, confidence and capacity of volunteers deepened over time, allowing the influence to spread further. As the volunteer coordinator of Arches Local, Stephen Perez, put it:

> *"It's hard to describe because what Big Local isn't is a firework display. It's not something instantaneous. A lot of things take time and that's what we've found. But given time and given the right structures and the right ingredients, you can make big changes."*

Spreading beyond Big Local into a field of civic renewal

Although strong networks were formed within Big Local, the work gained real momentum when the energy from Big Local combined with energy from other initiatives. The 16 years from Big Local's conception in 2010 to its official end in 2026 have been a formative time for

[27] Local Trust (2024) Learning from Big Local and Local Trust (2024) Voices of Big Local. No longer available.

[28] Hashmi, I., Studdert, J. & Charlesworth, L. (2023) Well-Placed: The impact of Big Local on the health of communities. London: New Local. P. 50

[29] Local Trust (2023) Big Local and Civic Participation. London: Local Trust. https://www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk/resources/big-local-and-civic-participation

neighbourhood-led development. In addition to Big Local, there have been other programmes run in a similar spirit, such as Power to Change, which provided support to community businesses and backed an agenda of community empowerment. There has also been a bottom-up movement of local innovators, from Civic Square in Birmingham, to Nudge Community Builders in Plymouth, to Hastings Commons, among many others. The UK government introduced new rights for communities, including the Right to Buy and the Right to Bid which added further momentum.

These forces together began to form what we call a field of civic renewal. We think of Phase 3 partly as embodying this field and partly as a series of efforts - some local, some pan-local, and some national - to further mature the field. When we step back to describe this work today, we would include:

- Methods for engaging in civic renewal in a reliable and repeatable way. For example, ways of activating community agency, like the Citizen Incubator, or design processes like the 100 Day Challenge, or well-practiced ways of bringing dilapidated buildings back to life under community ownership.
- Disciplines like community stewardship, peer navigators, and the core skills of community-led development, and associated practitioner networks. See Platform Places, The Relationships Project, Stir to Action, and the Mycelial Network.
- Financing mechanisms such as the (now closed) Community Ownership Fund, or mechanisms like community share issues. These are also now supported by an increasingly mature advisory market.
- Practised ways of exercising community rights, and support that helps people to do so, including Right to Buy and Right to Bid, the process of declaring a building or space an Asset of Community Value and new rights to take over vacant commercial property on high streets.
- New datasets for measuring social capacity and the vitality of civic life. See the Community Needs Index (CNI), a dataset that came out of Local Trust's work, as a measure of civic capacity. The CNI is now being used to select areas for the UK government's Pride in Place investment.
- Civic technologies that communities can use in the course of their work. This includes deliberative platforms like Polis, which can be used to find areas of common ground, or platforms to run sharing schemes or care networks.
- Learning and evaluation methods that suit community-led development, so that people can

tell what's working and how to improve. See Theory Based Evaluation and contribution analysis, and Human Learning Systems. Also ways to use data that empower local people, as opposed to using data as a top-down reporting mechanism. See Cornerstone Indicators and Citizen Scientists.

- New institutions to serve functions such as holding risk, or financing community asset transfers and building refurbishments, or for helping to organise people locally to come together to make decisions. See land exchanges, community land trusts, and backbone organisations, among a wide range of examples.

When we step back, what we see emerging in Phase 3 is an alternative to the more top-down bureaucratic paradigm of social improvement. For now, this field of civic renewal is still relatively new, certainly by comparison to bureaucracy, with its decades-old procedures and disciplines embodied in well-established and well-funded institutions. Still, the field is maturing. And now that these more systematic aspects of civic renewal are becoming clearer, it will be easier for the state and other major institutions, including funders like the National Lottery Community Fund and initiatives like Pride in Place, to support its further development.

Conclusion

In this report, we have synthesised the lessons from Big Local, and drawn out a clearer view of the practices of civic renewal. What does it take to do this work well?

The evidence suggests that Big Local worked, measured against traditional metrics, and on its own terms. The programme impacted social outcomes at the local population-level, adding value to people's lives beyond its direct and indirect costs. A deeper insight, harder to quantify with traditional methods, is that Big Local suggests that we can make society better not just synthetically, by funding point solutions to the symptoms of social problems, but also organically, by investing in the capacity of communities to make life better.

More than this, Big Local hints at the potency of this civic approach. In the grand scheme of things, the money Big Local added to local communities was small - the equivalent to two teaspoons in a bucket of water, relative to total household income in these areas. That this nonetheless made a visible difference speaks to what civic capacity can do when given the chance. If we can get the processes of civic life firing again - restoring habitats in which civic life thrives, and engaging in activities which repair networks of social relationships - this could begin to unlock some of the formidable capacity and ingenuity that is latent in communities.

What 16 years of work has helped to build is a field of civic renewal. We have described this field as analogous to rewilding in environmentalism; it is a way to bring out and spread processes that are organic and locally-rooted. This means that, like rewilding, the work has a distinctive quality to it. It exerts a kind of 'gentle effort' - one that is clear about its intentions and determined, but also aware of the damage heavy-handedness can do. Like rewilding, the work of civic renewal is not overbearing or controlling; otherwise, it would risk killing the very processes it is trying to support. However nor is it negligent, simply withdrawing to let communities fend for themselves. In this sense, civic rewilding combines strong leadership with humility, using the power of public leadership in service of a rich civic and associational

life.

In more concrete terms, we have described this practice in three phases:

1. **Protecting space** by using the power of the state, the authority of leadership, and the design of a programme like Big Local, to carve out capacity in local communities
2. **The community instinct** that communities exercise in that space, responding to complex social challenges in ways that are holistic, positive, relational, resourceful, and preventative
3. **Deepening and spreading** this community instinct and its associated activities, both within local areas and between them, building a field of civic renewal

This starts to answer two questions that have become increasingly urgent in recent years. First, the question that people often ask after hearing about an impressive community-led initiative: 'That sounds good, but does it scale?'. And, second, a question that is now often on the minds of public servants working to save our struggling institutions of government: 'We know that bureaucratic methods are struggling, but what's the alternative?'

What is now taking shape is a civic alternative. This is a set of approaches that are mature and well-evidenced and that have the potential to spread to communities across Britain. As public services struggle under the weight of work for which they are ill-suited, and as government gears up for a new generation of investment in neighbourhoods, these insights could not be more timely.

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