

“In a town where there are ten people for every six jobs, the idea of growth is a fantasy”

Sacha Bedding, Dyke House Big Local, Hartlepool

Widespread employment, pushed up by precarious jobs and zero-hours contracts, has not improved overall economic wellbeing. In Hartlepool, Thurrock and Morecambe - places where economic growth is failing to have any visible benefits - Hazel Sheffield discovers the power of individuals partnering with communities to create change.

Across England, 150 communities are using £1 million each to make their area a better place to live. They are part of Big Local, a resident-led programme of local transformation, described as ‘the boldest experiment yet in giving communities the means to create wealth’.

This essay is one of a series exploring how people and places are changing through Big Local. Each essay considers the lessons of Big Local for institutions and policymakers interested in radical devolution of power and responsibility to a community level.

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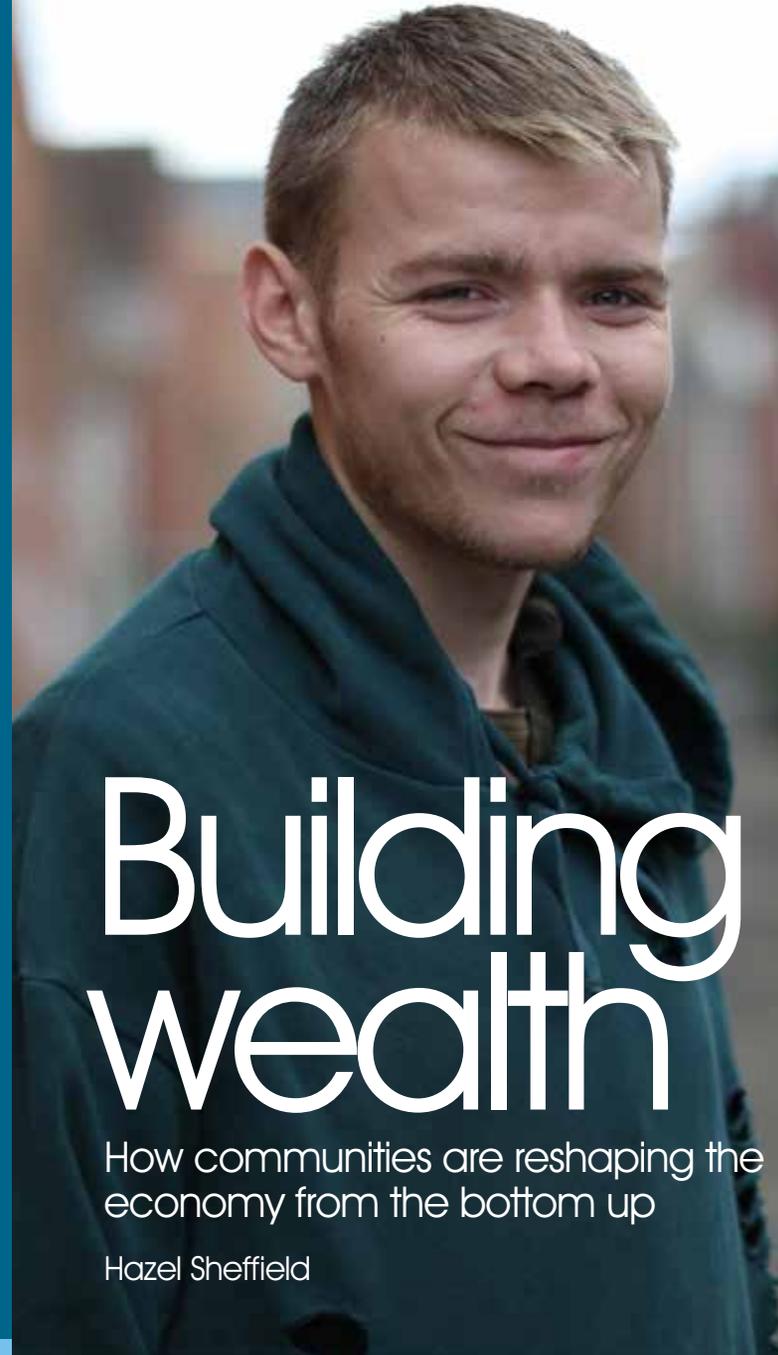
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Building wealth How communities are reshaping the economy from the bottom up



Building wealth

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Hazel Sheffield

Local Trust

About the author

Hazel Sheffield is a journalist and filmmaker based in London. She was business editor of the Independent, and now writes about business and economics for publications including the Independent, the Times and the Guardian. In 2016 she began documenting local economies emerging in the aftermath of austerity and Brexit through interviews and short films. That project can be found at farnearer.org.

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Callum Hills, Dyke House Big Local, Hartlepool

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ABOUT THIS ESSAY

BIG LOCAL IS ONE OF THE MOST radical and exciting grant programmes ever launched by a major Lottery funder. Between 2010-12 the Big Lottery Fund identified 150 areas that had historically ‘missed out’ on lottery and other funding. Each of those areas was allocated £1m of Big Local funding. This could be spent in any way they chose, provided local residents came together to plan and manage that funding, involving the wider community in the decision-making process. Beyond that, rules, constraints and priorities have been for local people to decide.

By design, the programme is bottom-up and community-led; there are no top-down targets or centrally-imposed delivery models. The timeframe for Big Local extends over 15 years, allowing communities to take their time, build confidence and skills, make decisions and deliver change without the usual pressures to meet end-of-year spend targets or other arbitrary bureaucratic deadlines.

The activities and initiatives Big Local areas have chosen to take forward reflect the diversity of the communities themselves. They include everything from building affordable homes to tackling antisocial behaviour; creating or preserving community facilities, to improving parks and sports centres. Elsewhere resident-led groups funded by Big Local have launched new training and employment schemes; tackled local health and environmental issues; championed community cohesion; and mobilised young people to lead

change in their areas. Most importantly, through their initiatives, residents of Big Local areas have collectively developed the skills, partnerships and confidence that will help them lead their communities into the future.

To help understand the context and relevance of Big Local, Local Trust has invited a range of writers, thinkers and researchers to reflect on the programme, publishing their views in long-form essays, allowing them space and scope unavailable in other media. In commissioning these essays, Local Trust doesn’t seek to impose editorial boundaries or direct the work being produced; rather we welcome the opportunity to bring new and independent thinking and writing to reflect on the challenges facing our communities.

David Boyle kicked things off in 2017 with his essay ‘The Grammar of Change’, which highlights the potential released by the Big Local approach as local communities seek to adapt and respond to rapidly changing times. In ‘New Seeds Beneath the Snow?’ Julian Dobson placed Big Local in the context of past area-based regeneration programmes. More recently, in ‘Skittled Out’, Dan Gregory explored the importance of social and economic infrastructure.

In this essay, Hazel Sheffield, former business editor of the Independent, and creator of farnearer.org – a website catalogue of local people building economic resilience in their communities – visits three Big Local areas seeking to rebuild local economies challenged by poverty, austerity, deindustrialization and long term economic decline. She has come back with inspiring stories from very different places, but all characterised by a rich sense of local identity, remarkable reserves of energy and imagination, and a shared determination to build strong, inclusive local economies that can benefit all.

FOREWORD

IN FAR TOO MANY CITIES AND TOWNS across the UK, entire neighborhoods are being left behind, facing the pain and fear that comes with persistent unemployment and economic insecurity, with the loss of a sense of a future for themselves and their children. And why?

Simply put, our economy is no longer producing the outcomes these forgotten communities need. Cutbacks in funding and support, together with a global race to the bottom, have hollowed out the promise of shared prosperity. While the stock market roars, people are left to suffer, scrape by, or simply give up.

I know this despair well—I’ve seen it on the streets of Preston, in the eyes of my constituents. But I’ve also seen hope and resilience and strength, a hunger for a chance to build a better future.

Hazel Sheffield—a dedicated and vital voice amplifying the power of community-driven solutions—is no stranger to either this despair or to these reservoirs of hope. Her important account of the Big Local initiative unfolds in the space between the two—the despair in 150 forgotten communities that drove the investment of one million pounds from the Big Lottery Fund to each of them, and the hope animating residents as they come together to design solutions.

In the three detailed case studies that follow here, Sheffield’s talent as a storyteller shines as she puts us inside

the community centres and on the streets of some of our hardest hit neighbourhoods, as their residents confront the possibility of hope. And the stories she tells us are all the more important because they highlight the difficulty in all of this—a cheque for a million pounds isn’t a solution, it’s the promise of one, and, as she puts it “it can take time for local residents to start making decisions about things that have traditionally been made for them”.

There is more to be found in Sheffield’s account, however, than just inspiration. Wisdom is there too—in the insistence that local solutions solve nothing unless they begin to address the systemic problems underlying the long, slow and hidden crisis these neighborhoods are facing. Doing so requires a framework—community wealth building—that works to rebuild the value chains of local economies, that reknits the fabric of local assets, that makes hope concrete.

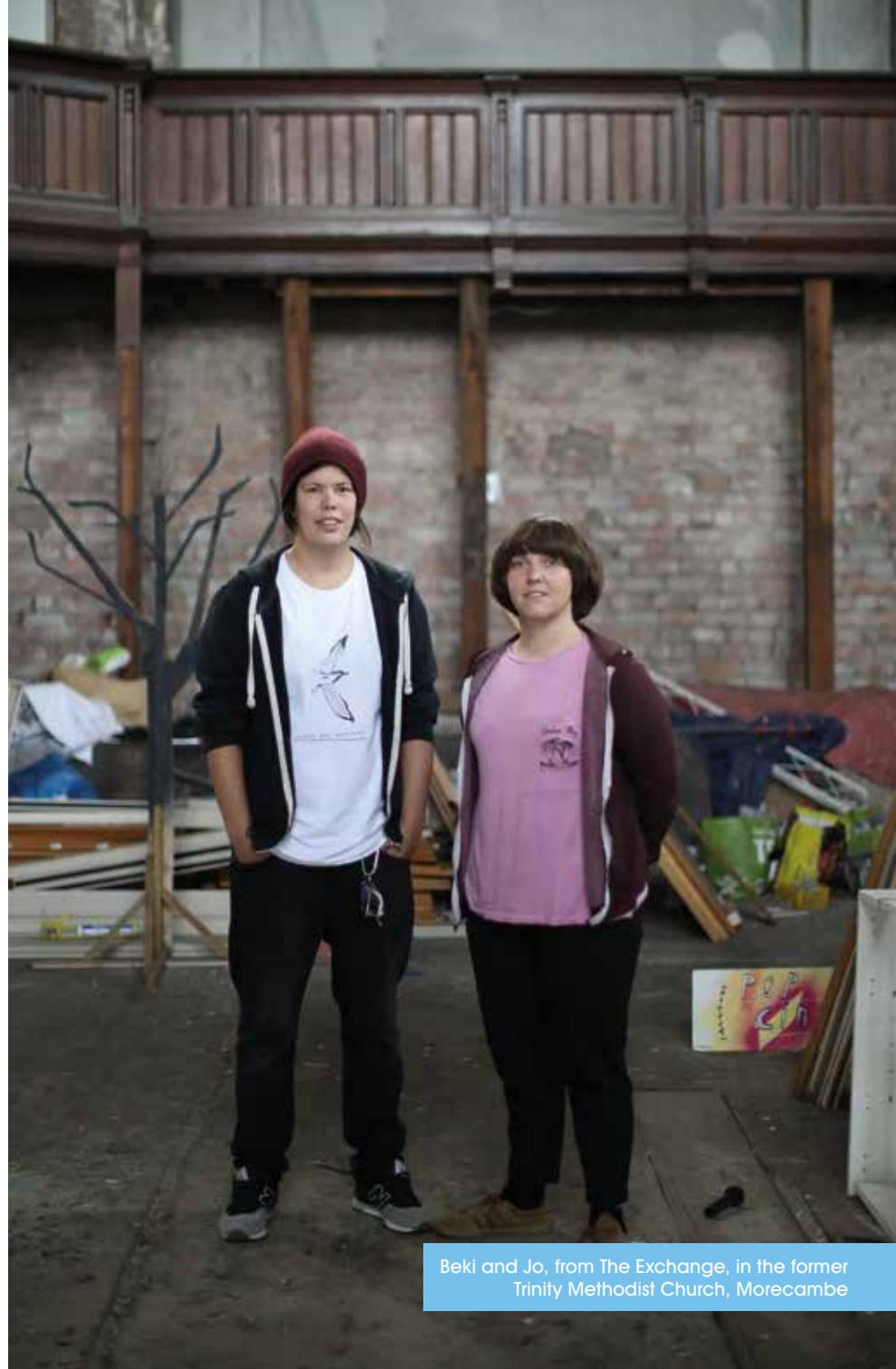
Community wealth-building, to be sure, isn’t a one-size-fits-all solution—every community, at every scale, needs to find its own champions and convenors, its own ways of adopting and improving promising models and strategies. But “reimagining the future”, as Sheffield notes, cannot take place in a vacuum. Local resilience and creativity are tremendous, irreplaceable agents of change, but alone they remain insufficient—they need access to the ideas that can help catalyse action and the resources needed to make this action effective.

Here in Preston, I have seen the impact of what Big Local’s funding—and more importantly, the trust it places in communities—can do. The wards of Fishwick and St. Matthew’s in Inner East Preston have developed and begun to implement impressive, community-driven efforts around non-extractive lending, job training—and, more,

efforts that provide a vital complement to, and an essential foundation for, the larger-scale shifts towards community wealth building we have been pioneering at council level in partnership with our local anchor institutions to redirect their purchasing and investment. If there is hope for a future for our forgotten communities—and I think Sheffield would agree—it starts with efforts like these, giving the people what they need to build their own paths out of the trap of austerity.

Councillor Matthew Brown

Senior Fellow for the Promotion of Community Wealth Building in the UK at The Democracy Collaborative and Leader of Preston City Council.



Beki and Jo, from The Exchange, in the former Trinity Methodist Church, Morecambe



The Annexe, Dyke House, Hartlepool

Introduction

Beyond growth

POLITICIANS USE THE WORDS ‘INCLUSIVE GROWTH’ to describe a better way of running the economy, where more people benefit from bigger or new businesses. The words imply that some people are currently excluded from the benefit when the UK economy grows. You do not have to look very far in Hartlepool to find those people.

“In a town where there are ten people for every six jobs, the idea of growth is a fantasy,” says Sacha Bedding, the manager of the Wharton Trust, a charity in the Dyke House area of the town.

It’s lunchtime, and Bedding has just sat down to eat his pasta from a Tupperware box on the leather sofa of the building that is the home of the Wharton Trust, called The Annexe. This community space has become a lifeline to the residents of Dyke House. It is used as a youth club, community cafe, a place to register for benefits on computers and a meeting space for the Dyke House Big Local partnership, which has some of the youngest members in the Big Local network.

The Annexe also provides a refuge for some of the most maligned in a place where many live below the poverty line. On the day of my visit, a handful of men and women sit around tables and lean against the walls in the sparsely furnished front room, eating lunches of sandwiches with chips and crisps.

It has been an unremarkable morning. First thing, an excluded teenager from the academy round the corner tried to rip off the door handle to get into the building. Big Local members tried to calm the boy until the teacher from the pupil referral unit arrived with a metal detector, scanned him for weapons and ushered him swearing and thrashing up the stairs.

On the way back from the takeaway, Big Local members stood with residents who emerged from their homes in their socks to watch bailiffs evicting a 72-year-old woman and her dog. One of the residents tried to reason with the bailiffs while calling the elderly woman's relatives. The tall, uniformed men unpacked their tools to remove the front door with shocking calmness in the face of desperate neighbours. But young people here aren't so easily shocked. Some of them later tell me they have been evicted themselves.

While the national economy of the UK is growing, the benefits have not reached the residents of Dyke House. Simply maintaining living standards here is proving impossible. Life expectancy is falling.

Globally, economic growth now only benefits certain people. A gulf is widening between those who are getting richer and the majority, who struggle to flatline. 82 per cent of wealth generated across the world in 2017 went to the richest one per cent of the global population, while the 3.7 billion people who make up the poorest half saw their wealth stay the same.¹

In the UK, the distribution of income has been shaped not only by the increasing pull of cities, draining smaller towns of people and resources, but also by the financial crisis, which has hit the poor and the young hardest. Young people today are more likely to be unskilled than those of retirement age, doubling their chances of unemployment.² In Hartlepool, 40 per cent of people have no qualifications. That translates into the highest number of workless households in the country.

Recent work by the journalist David Pilling and others has contributed to the sense that there are shortcomings in the way countries measure the economy. Growth measured by gross domestic product, or by the monetary value of certain goods and services produced by a nation over time, does not match with the reality of most people's lives.

Politics is changing as a result. Thomas Piketty, an economist, has noted that both the left and the right sides of politics have become the preserves of elites, as the left has become better educated and more middle class, while the right has become richer. Low-income, low-education voters feel abandoned by a two-party system that no longer represents them, Piketty says, sending these voters to support populist causes, like the return to sovereignty represented by Brexit. He calls this nativism, in opposition to the globalism espoused by the highly educated elites on the left, and the high-wealth elites on the right.

Piketty's analysis also explains why economic growth alone has not relieved social frustrations over inequality and economic insecurity. If the party-political system is dominated by elites, no one party has an incentive to ensure growth is

¹ Oxfam, <https://www.oxfam.org.uk/media-centre/press-releases/2018/01/more-than-80-per-cent-of-new-global-wealth-goes-to-top-1-per-cent-while-poorest-half-get-nothing>, January 27, 2018

² Zwart, S. and M. Baker (2018), "Improving productivity and job quality of low-skilled workers in the United Kingdom", OECD Economics Department Working Papers, No. 1457, OECD Publishing, Paris. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/14dfd584-en>

inclusive. Those left behind, finding they are not represented by a mainstream party, may seek out alternatives.

In Thurrock in Essex, 72.3 per cent of people voted for Brexit. “They thought, ‘You’ve forgotten about us,’” Neil Woodbridge, a proud Essex native, told me one day. “It wasn’t anything to do with racism, it was about you lot in London with your high rents and your stupid mortgages have forgotten about us white working-class boys. I know there’s a lot written about it already, but it is just true.”

Big Local is an experiment in redressing inequality. It was launched in 2010 to give £1 million each to residents of 150 of the poorest areas of the UK. The idea was that these people had bought a lot of lottery tickets and scratch cards, but not had their fair share of the proceeds. Across the country, reps—experienced community development workers, often with backgrounds in the regeneration initiatives of the eighties and nineties—were sent out to recruit volunteer residents, who then formed loose boards called partnerships. The partnerships nominated a locally trusted organisation to hold money they withdrew from Local Trust, the London-based charity behind Big Local. Then the residents decided how to spend it, free from templates, targets and top-down control.

Towards wealth

A pattern emerged on my visits to Big Local areas. While some of the partnerships had spent money on one-off expenses, such as festivals and events, all were preoccupied with investing in assets—either technology, people or property—so that the benefits of the programme endured beyond its ten-year term.

The Democracy Collaborative, a US research institute dedicated to making economies more democratic, calls this

kind of investment community wealth building. In the field, there is a growing consensus that, in areas where the economy has failed, the notion of growth should be replaced with stability and sustainability achieved by investing in assets. Michael Sherraden, a US academic, calls assets “hope in concrete form”.

Before I go into community wealth building in more detail, it is helpful to examine the shortcomings of inclusive growth. The term emerged from economists working in developing countries in the 2000s, when organisations like the World Bank realised that their economic predictions were flawed.³ The UK context has been informed by an inclusive growth commission that was launched by the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) two months before the EU referendum in April 2016. The commission found that, to make growth more inclusive, efforts would have to be better coordinated with a national agenda, but that the design and implementation should ideally be local. Big Local goes one further, avoiding all prescribed solutions in favour of letting communities design and implement their own ideas locally.

The RSA also differentiates between social and place-based inclusive growth. Socially, growth should benefit people in every type of employment, the report says, including those who face barriers to high-quality jobs. Meanwhile place-based growth should address inequalities in opportunities between different parts of the country and within economic geographies. These facets are also visible in the Big Local programme, which is both social—putting power in the form of capital in the hands of residents—and place-based, targeting those parts of the UK that have fallen behind.

³ Stott, Josh, What is inclusive growth and why does it matter, JRF, 2017, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/blog/what-inclusive-growth-and-why-does-it-matter>

But when it comes to the recommendations of the Inclusive Growth Commission, the picture is more complex. The report recommends investment in social infrastructure, “including public health, early-years support, skills and employment services”, alongside investment in physical infrastructure and business development, to create “first-order impact on productivity and living standards”.⁴

Suddenly the recommendations look exactly like the job of the government, with all the many departments and policymakers that entails. “Inclusive growth has been picked up because it offers some soft face to liberal economic policy,” says Neil McInroy, the chief executive of the Centre for Local Economic Strategies in the UK, who submitted evidence to the Inclusive Growth Commission. “Theresa May said she wanted an economy for everyone, and inclusive growth seemed like the least scary way of doing it.”

The government’s preoccupation with inclusive growth began before Theresa May’s time in office. From 2014, an all-party parliamentary group on inclusive growth brought together MPs, business people and researchers to pinpoint areas for reform. In 2015, it published essays from business leaders on how to “deliver growth through people over the next parliament” which focused on one aspect: jobs.

An essay titled ‘Developing the talents of the next generation’ by Adam Marshall, the executive director of the British Chambers of Commerce, said BCC members were “particularly concerned about young people’s readiness for work, with 88 per cent of members saying school leavers were unprepared for work”.⁵

In a separate essay, Steve Holliday, former chair of the Energy Efficiency Industrial Partnership and Chief Executive of the National Grid, wrote: “To deliver growth we need a supply of highly skilled people... it remains important to stimulate and contextualise STEM [science, technology, engineering and maths] education to school pupils at an early age to meet demand.”

Yet it is increasingly clear that jobs alone are not enough to address rising inequality. The UK had its highest employment rate on record in 2018, at 75.6 per cent. But it comes 21st in the 2018 Inclusive Development Index, behind Ireland, Slovenia and South Korea.⁶

The UK lost points because living standards have declined in recent years. UK life expectancy is comparatively low at 71.4, compared to Japan’s impressive 74.9. Britons do not benefit from generous policies on parental leave or strong collective bargaining as enjoyed by Norway, which topped the chart.

These findings suggest it takes more than jobs to make a healthy economy. This is echoed in the 2017 Taylor Review into modern working practices in the UK, which concluded that it is not enough to get more people into work, but that the work must also be of a high quality and offer the worker routes to progress and prosperity.

I saw this at the Big Local partnership in Grays Riverside in Essex, where more than a thousand jobs suddenly appeared with the arrival of an Amazon fulfilment centre in 2016. Months later, an undercover reporter for Essex Live described how employees were “alone in a locked metal cage, 10 feet from the nearest employee” and were hired to “grab and process items delivered to them by an army of machines for

⁴ Inclusive Growth Commission, Making Our Economy Work for Everyone, RSA, 2017, page 8.

⁵ How to deliver through people over the next parliament, 2015, http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/22400/1/How_to_deliver_growth_through_people_over_the_next_Parliament.pdf, page 11

⁶ World Economic Forum, the Inclusive Development Index 2018, <http://reports.weforum.org/the-inclusive-development-index-2018/executive-summary/>

packing”. The employees reportedly had nine seconds to process each item off the tower of shelves carried to them by the robots—a target of 300 items an hour.⁷

“There are jobs out there,” says Connor Hammond, a 25-year-old sound engineer who has opened his own recording studio with help from the Grays Riverside Big Local partnership. “But we don’t want to work in a warehouse, or for Tesco, and sometimes a criminal record can make even getting those jobs harder.”

Multinational corporations provide some jobs in all three of the Big Local areas I visited. But the owners of the plants and factories that offered these jobs were all based offshore, from the EDF Energy power stations in Hartlepool and Morecambe that send profits from local labour back to France, to the Amazon fulfillment plant that sends profits to Seattle in the US.

The UK is facing a crisis of employment, as these rich multinational corporations channel capital into using artificial intelligence and robotics to make processes more efficient. The onset of AI is already contributing to deskilling the workforce. Almost 30 per cent of 16- to 24-year-olds in the UK have weak skills, three times higher than in the best performing countries.⁸ Those with weak skills are about twice as likely to be unemployed than those with higher skill levels.

The Institute for Public Policy Research calls this “the paradox of plenty”.⁹ The paradox states that society should

be getting richer, but for many communities, the rise of tech monopolies with small workforces and offshore profit centres, plus the growing encroachment of artificial intelligence on low skilled jobs, has reinforced inequalities.

Democracy is suffering as a result. If it is to survive, communities must move away from growth and income as measures of economic wellbeing and towards sustainable asset-based wealth.

Wealth comes not only from having money, but from ownership of the means to make money, plus ownership of assets that pay returns in the long term. These assets are not always bricks and mortar, or businesses, but people and the networks between them that can strengthen a community against economic shock.

In Grays in the Thames Estuary, the Big Local partnership is helping residents access training and funding to support their own ideas about what work should look like, rather than forcing them into the warehouses down on the wharfs. The money is being used to build individual capacity, described as individual capital by Marjorie Kelley, the executive vice-president of the Democracy Collaborative in the US. Individual capital is “the stock of skills, entrepreneurial spirit, health and physical capability of people in a place”, Kelley says. When individual capital grows into social capital, or “the stock of trust, relationships and networks that exist in a community”, this can result in what the Ford Foundation calls value chains, or chains of individuals and businesses that support one another.

In Morecambe, the West End partnership is emerging from a period in which it struggled to shape its purpose after years of decline and top-down decision-making. It is becoming an enabler of other community groups at a time of crisis,

⁷ Selby, Alan and Meyler, Peter. *Life inside Amazon's Essex warehouse where humans are reduced to livestock, existing only to service robots*, November 2017, accessed March 2018, <https://www.essexlive.news/news/essex-news/life-inside-amazons-essex-warehouse-834044>

⁸ Zwart, S. and M. Baker (2018), “Improving productivity and job quality of low-skilled workers in the United Kingdom”, OECD Economics Department Working Papers, No. 1457, OECD Publishing, Paris. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/14dfd584-en>

⁹ Lawrence, Matthew and Mason, Nigel, *Capital Gains: Broadening company ownership in the UK economy*, IPPR Commission on Economic Justice, page 6.

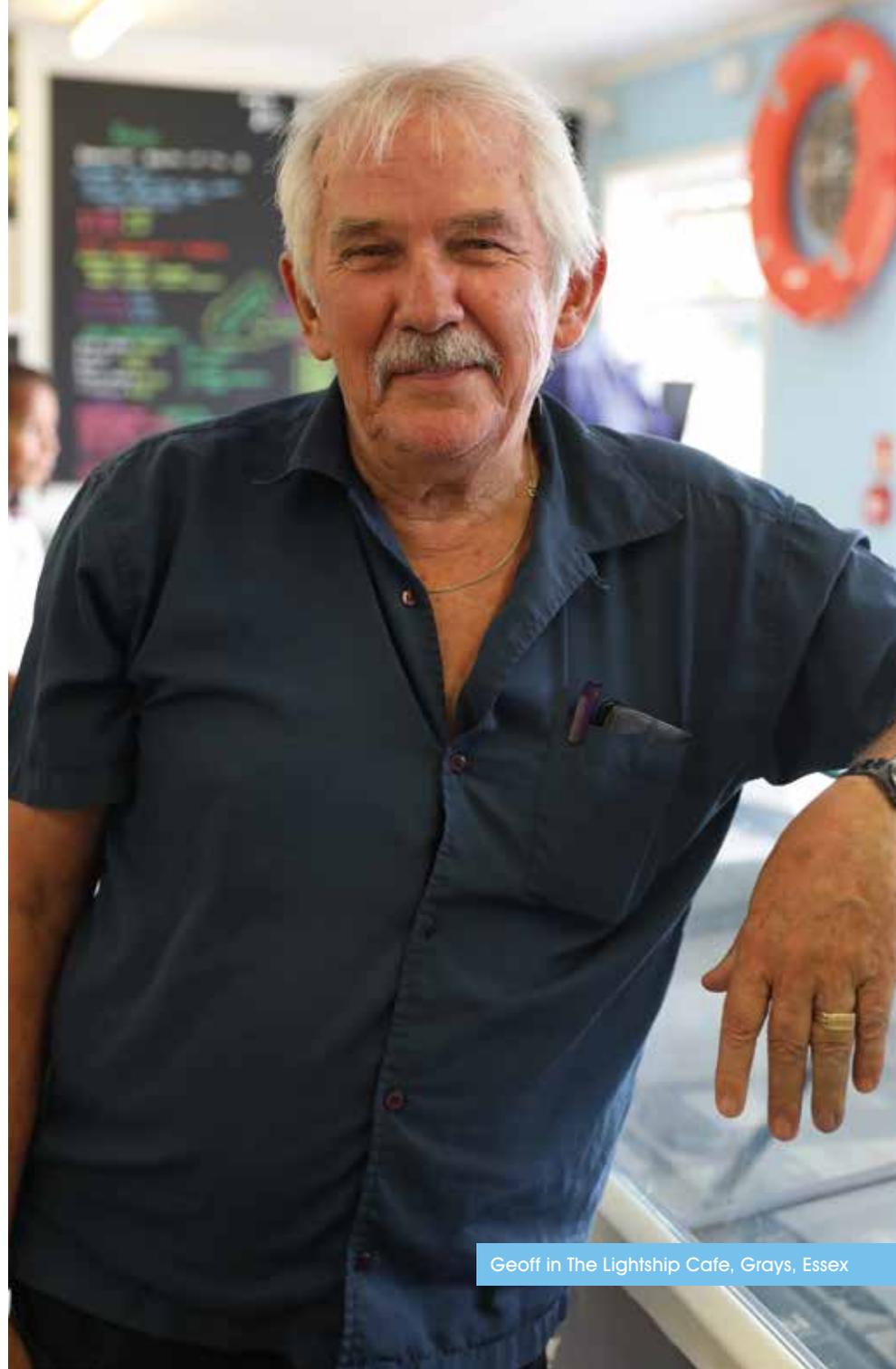
creating social capital. In Hartlepool, the Wharton Trust is working with young people to build individual capital. But the partnership is also making innovative use of Big Local funds to invest in built capital that can shape community prosperity in the longer term.

Since austerity, it is more vital than ever that residents are given the means to find innovative ways to create capital and stave off decline. Local council budgets in England were cut by 40 per cent between 2010 and 2016.¹⁰ Authorities are just about coping with frontline services. Measures to prevent crises of health, education and housing in the longer term have, in many cases, gone out of the window.

Big Local was never intended to shore up communities eroded by austerity. But it does give selected areas an important resource that is in increasingly short supply: money. In this respect, it is the boldest experiment yet in giving communities the means to create wealth.

The notion of wealth building as a kind of economic development is in its infancy. But recent political developments and the rise of populist movements suggest that developing ideas about wealth building may be critical to the survival of democracies. In exploring the contribution of Big Local in three separate communities, I will measure what it takes for residents to go beyond spending their Lottery spoils towards creating more inclusive communities with reserves of wealth.

¹⁰ <https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/future-funding-outlook-co-18b.pdf>





Mike and Gillian, West End Million Big Local, Morecambe

CHAPTER ONE

Morecambe, West End Million

Building social capital

EVERYONE HAS A BREAKING POINT. For Mike Barr and Gillian Taylor, it was the day the council replaced the play park opposite their house with a car park. The council minutes from September 2012 record no objections to the decision to rip up the play park to make space for cars.¹¹ But Barr and Taylor felt that a community space was being torn down for no good reason. “They took out all the play equipment without consulting everyone and they said there’s not a play area, children will play anywhere,” Taylor says at the Exchange, a pub in the centre of Morecambe, where I meet Big Local partnership members on a Saturday in March 2018.

The couple moved into their four-bedroom house in the West End in the early nineties, when the property cost them just £17,500. Taylor liked the handsome Victorian houses in Morecambe and the sense of community. She shopped on Yorkshire Street, a busy, neighbourhood high street with lots

¹¹ Morecambe Town Council Minutes, <http://www.morecambe.gov.uk/media/uploads/2014/02/2012-09-27-Council-Minutes.pdf>

of family-run stores. And they were five minutes from the sea, where every morning the sun sets over the bay, with the mountains of the Lake District in the distance.

But times were hard in the West End. Heysham Power Station had just been completed and the workers who had filled the boarding houses during the week left Morecambe to return to their families. Councils from nearby areas moved their poor into the cheap housing in the West End. In the first few years she lived there, Taylor didn't dare leave out her washing in case it was stolen and cashed in at a Cash for Clothes store round the corner.

When Big Local first arrived in Morecambe in 2012, Taylor saw it as an opportunity for local people to have an impact on the West End after years of top-down initiatives. Worsening economic conditions, combined with abandoned regeneration plans, had created widespread disengagement and distrust among residents. Seeing the play park ripped out against the wishes of residents was the final straw Taylor needed to take action. "So many things have started in the area and finished because of lack of funding," Gillian Taylor says. "It's been happening for years and years and years."

Big Local was set up with the idea that people should be connected, have choices and be supported to achieve lasting change in the place where they live.¹² The success of the programme depends upon people feeling empowered to take action. This process of becoming empowered is part of how communities develop social capital.

The American sociologist James S Coleman defines social capital as an action through which people or communities might achieve certain ends that, in the absence of action,

might not be possible.¹³ Taylor and Barr took action against the new car park every evening after they heard the news, going round the houses talking to people and doing surveys and questionnaires. "I went out every two hours for a month to write down every car on every street," Taylor says. The incident also spurred them to join the West End Million, the nascent Big Local partnership. But they were wary about making more mistakes. "I want to make a difference, but I hope we don't to do any damage," says Barr, reflecting on his role in the partnership.

From day one, the West End Million partnership was faced with countless examples of democratic and economic exclusion, plus a complex web of social needs. It would take an emerging community network of social groups to begin to identify the extent of the damage to the local economy in Morecambe and to set about a more inclusive approach.

Seasides fall on hard times

The economic downturn that Morecambe has faced in the last century is typical of the plight of many seaside towns in the UK. A study by academics at Sheffield Hallam in 2008 showed that 26 of the 37 principle seaside towns in England have an overall level of deprivation greater than the English average, with Morecambe and Heysham showing signs of a weaker economy than the average seaside town.¹⁴ Decades of slow decline have contributed to residents' sense that they are locked out of decision-making and excluded from the economy.

¹³ Coleman, J. *Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital*. American Journal of Sociology Supplement 94, 1988, page 97.

¹⁴ Beatty, Christina, Fothergill, Steve and Wilson, Ian. *England's Seaside Towns, a benchmarking study*, Communities and Local Government, 2008, page 9.

¹² Busstu, Sonia. Building social capital: Summary of Learning, October 2015, p. 3

It's hard to imagine now that the West End was once an area of luxury and leisure that sprang up in the 19th century to accommodate holidaymakers from nearby industrial towns. After the extension of the railway line from Lancaster to Morecambe in 1848, it became fashionable for people to live in Morecambe and work in Bradford, giving it the nickname Bradford-by-the-Sea.¹⁵ The Bauhaus-inspired Midland hotel welcomed visitors to the seafront as a symbol of the opulence of the era.

As the population of the town tripled between 1851 and 1881,¹⁶ the land between Heysham and Morecambe was parcelled up into lots and sold to developers, who built the symmetrical Victorian terraces that Taylor came to admire. When Heysham and Morecambe amalgamated in 1928, Morecambe gained a new civic crest and motto, 'Beauty Surrounds, Health Abounds', which captured the fashion for salt-water bathing.

Tourism is still Morecambe's primary industry. It reached its high point in the forties, when the Second World War brought more visitors to Morecambe. In 1949, 100,000 day trippers came to see the first night of the illuminations.¹⁷

But by the sixties and the seventies, theatre runs were shortening and visitor numbers were dropping as the town became the victim of better road links, the rise of foreign holidays and the expansion of the middle class. As people started taking package tours abroad, Morecambe fell into decline.

The authorities attempted to stop the decline in 2005, when the North West Regional Development Agency put £4

million towards a £7 million renovation of the Midland Hotel and further cash towards a redevelopment plan for the West End. A 2005 strategy for the West End noted that Morecambe had a housing problem, with large properties that once housed wealthy residents or holidaying families now converted for multiple occupancy or abandoned.

The plan, produced by architects BDP, was to try to clear out poverty by knocking down the worst properties and refurbishing others. Planners hoped to create family homes that might attract the middle classes at Chatsworth Gardens. Asked to give a second opinion, architect Irena Bauman said the plan rang "alarm bells". In her response, she called for the development to be co-designed with residents, to make the process more inclusive.

"A place will not regenerate sustainably if it is not grown out of its own identity," she wrote. "The daydream of middle-class takeover for Morecambe is not one that I share."¹⁸ In any case the plan was doomed. The council acquired a number of properties, but after the financial crash of 2008 the renovations never happened and the properties remained empty.¹⁹

Eventually, the council turned to a developer-led scheme to transform the empty homes on Chatsworth Road into townhouses and maisonettes. Residents again felt excluded from the houses and felt they were not for the likes of them—especially since the majority of people in the area don't own their own homes. Just 41 per cent of homes in the West End are owner-occupied, compared with a north-west average of

¹⁵ Moore, BG. *Tokens of Sacrifice*, 1975

¹⁶ Guise, Barry and Brook, Pam. *The Midland Hotel: Morecambe's White Hope*, Palatine Books, 2008, page 24.

¹⁷ Bingham, Roger K. *Lost Resort: the flow and ebb of Morecambe*, Cicerone, 1990, page 17.

¹⁸ Bauman, Irena. *Second Opinion: Winning Back Morecambe's West End: Masterplan and Delivery Strategy*. <https://www.placemakingresource.com/article/463299/morecambes-west-end>

¹⁹ Lancaster City Council Regeneration and Planning Service Empty Homes Strategy 1 July 2013-30 June 2015, <https://www.lancaster.gov.uk/assets/attach/1549/Adopted-Version-Empty-Homes-Strategy-Oct-2014.pdf>

65 per cent. Almost half—48 per cent—have private landlords, compared with a north-west average of 14 per cent. Most of the houses are multiple occupancy or split-tenancy flats.

Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has shown that private renters often face higher levels of economic exclusion than homeowners and social renters. The number of private renters in poverty in the UK almost doubled from 2.2 million in 2002/03 to 4.1 million in 2012/13. Meanwhile, poverty fell among homeowners and social renters in the same period.²⁰

“Tenancies around here tend to be six-month rolling contracts,” says Claire Cozler, a West End resident and councillor for nearby Westgate Ward. “So if a landlord doesn’t want you, the landlord doesn’t have to keep you.” She says Section 21, which was introduced in 1999 to give landlords the right to repossess homes without giving a reason, increased the number of evictions in the area.

“It actually happened to me in my previous house,” she says. “Within 28 days they can have you out of the house for a reason of their choice. It’s very quick. I’ve met families who didn’t know it was being done to them and literally came home and found their possessions on the street.”

Since the onset of austerity, the council has had less capacity to offer support to families on the brink. Cozler has seen children’s centres and other community spaces closed down as budget cuts have taken effect: “We used to see simple problems—housing, or a problem with dustbins or something. Then suddenly we were getting a raft of people with really, really complex problems. It might be housing benefits, or more desperate, to the point where people can’t feed their children or put money in the electricity.”

Big Local arrived in Morecambe at this critical moment, when it seemed that the delicate fabric of the West End was about to disintegrate. Taylor and Barr heard about Big Local not long after and went along to see if they could make sure that the Parliament Street car-park incident didn’t happen again. “We wanted to have something positive to show for it,” Barr says.

The partnership, calling itself West End Million, planned a year-round programme of community events, including festivals, lighting for the streets around the West End in autumn and winter and decorations for spring and summer, plus setting up a community grants scheme to support entrepreneurial residents.

While the plans looked promising, the group fell into disagreements as people left and the going got tough. “There were personality clashes,” Mike Barr says. “If you’re doing this as a volunteer and it’s unpleasant, you won’t stick it out.” West End Million’s accounts record one-off support for multiple community events, from a fringe festival at the Alhambra theatre to Wise Up Workshops that build confidence through art.

Some partnership members now say they feel too much money was spent on festivals. While members elected to support events as a way to build their presence in the area, they soon found that the same people were coming back to them with repeat applications for funding, suggesting that they had not been able to make the events sustainable the first time round. In the time since, the partnership has created a more sophisticated, tiered set of forms for funding, to help applicants learn how to apply to other sources of arts funding outside Morecambe, such as Arts Council England and the National Lottery.

²⁰ Birch, Jules, *Housing and Poverty*, 2015, page 4. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/file/47030/download?token=nLW6BIHI&filetype=full-report>.

Around the UK, many partnerships say they have grown in confidence and increased their knowledge and skills through Big Local.²¹ Where Big Local nurtures social capital, it can empower residents to take a more active role in shaping their local economy. But not all Big Local partnerships evolve in the same way. Gill Taylor feels angry about the lack of direction or clarity from Local Trust about what to do with the money. “I thought, what a ridiculous social experiment,” she says. “It does feel a bit like rats put in a maze.”

Rachel Rowney, director of programmes and resources at Local Trust, says the Big Local partnership has taken on more of a supportive role in partnerships as time has gone on. Rowney joined the programme at the outset, when The National Lottery put together a consortium of people who had worked in the third sector to administer the fund. Each organisation in the consortium came with a different background. The Community Development Foundation had been based in community development; Renaisi were about neighbourhood renewal; and UnLtd were about entrepreneurs. They each brought skills and experience to the table, but a key element of the programme was explicitly not to make the sorts of top-down decisions that had characterised earlier programmes—instead, letting local people find their own way in their own time.

This approach came with a long period of growing and learning among residents as they developed the skills to start addressing local needs. Rowney had worked on the New Deal for Communities, a regeneration programme led by Tony Blair’s government, which talked a lot about things being resident-led. But she found there was always a

disproportionate number of officers to residents in the room. Final decisions usually came down to a single organisation, often one funded by the local authority.

“My experience of the [Big Local] meetings is very different,” Rowney says. “They don’t feel as professionalised in terms of the discussion. It’s not led by people in suits but by people that live in that space.”

However, it can take time for local residents to start making decisions about things that have traditionally been made for them. Rowney said: “In areas and communities that have often been ‘done to’, it can take time to build the confidence and trust necessary to make that a reality.”

Just like it took a play park to spur Gill Taylor and Mike Barr to action, it would take another catalyst for the West End Million to find its purpose in Morecambe. While the West End Million was trying to build a presence and improve community cohesion, a crisis was brewing that would bring forward the pace of change.

A decisive moment

On December 18, 2017, hundreds of residents climbed the stairs at the Carleton Club, a defunct nightclub at the old Alhambra theatre on the seafront in Morecambe. Local doctors and teachers queued with patients and parents in the bar to sign their names on a register. Piles of coats, jumpers and other donated clothes grew on oblong tables in the corner. People filtered into rows of seats on the old dancefloor ready for a start that kept getting delayed as more people arrived.

A week earlier, ITV had broadcast a newsreel that laid bare the extent of poverty in Morecambe and shocked viewers from the surrounding areas. It showed working mums relying on food

²¹ Bussu, Sonia. Building social capital: Summary of Learning, October 2015, p. 17.

banks to feed their children; teachers at a local primary school washing pupils' uniforms and charging their parents' mobile phones; and doctors who had seen children suffering from rickets and other diseases usually found in developing countries.

The day of the broadcast, Jo Ainscough came home to find Facebook exploding with people making plans to donate clothing and food. As the secretary for Sustainability Morecambe, which makes meals out of food heading for landfill, she had distributed meals to some of Morecambe's more disadvantaged families.

"But even I hadn't put all the dots together," Ainscough says. She knew if someone didn't coordinate the community response, things could spiral out of control.

Across town, Jo Bambrough was having exactly the same thought. Bambrough is the co-director of a different Exchange, an art cafe and shop in the West End of Morecambe, where poverty is entrenched. For over a year, she had been running a campaign called Steeple for the People to bring a church opposite the Exchange into community ownership and turn it into a space to incubate local artists and businesses.

Most of her days were taken up with more pressing social concerns in the area, such as making sure people who visited the Exchange were warm enough or that they had eaten that day. With her partner Beki Melrose, Bambrough had turned the Exchange into a safe space for those in need, though this had slowed down the big plan to turn Morecambe's derelict buildings into community assets. "We don't get much work done in the day," Bambrough says. "But I've never once seen someone come into this venue and not get the help they need, whether it's a lift or someone to speak to about their benefits."

After the ITV broadcast, Bambrough knew all her timelines for galvanising the community with arts events and

asset transfers had gone out the window: "When we saw the response we realised that if we didn't do something now, that energy would be lost. We had to just go with it."

Bambrough and Ainscough knew each other through the Big Local partnership, the West End Million. Together they approached community groups in search of a place to meet. Meanwhile, Dr Andy Knox, the local GP who had spoken to reporters about seeing children with rickets, posted a video plea for people in Morecambe to come together to figure out what to do next.

Dr Knox said in the video that there had already been overwhelming kindness in the community with food parcels and Christmas presents delivered to families in the area. He said many people were also feeling angry that Morecambe had been allowed to spiral into such a sorry state. "What do we do with our anger? We can get really mad or we can harness it. So, on Monday 18th December, at the Carleton Club in Morecambe, we are going to come together and try to make a change."

They posted Facebook messages, put up posters and told their friends. But none of the organisers was quite prepared for the turnout. "Three hundred people," Jo Ainscough says. "I thought, 'Oh god, what have I started here.'"

They called it the Morecambe Community Collective: a new umbrella group for the co-ordinated effort between Sustainability Morecambe, the Exchange, Friends of the Alhambra, Stanley's Youth and Community Centre and many other residents who needed somewhere to channel their energy. Many of the groups contained members or former members of West End Million. This convergence of energy would provide renewed focus for the partnership.

Sian Jay, who took over as the Big Local rep for the area

in October 2017, says the collective has created a sense of vision that had been missing from West End Million and other community groups in Morecambe. “There’s lots of things that are great about Morecambe, there is lots of passion and commitment, people who are not afraid of doing it themselves,” Sian says. “But it needs to be knitted together in some way, with some understanding of strategy.”

In larger towns and cities, local authorities have traditionally imposed economic strategies on residents. Nearby Preston, the administrative capital of Lancashire, is the first place in the UK where councillors have embraced community wealth building to strengthen the economy in the face of catastrophic budget cuts.

Preston councillors worked with UK think tank the Centre for Local Economic Strategies, to identify where money was leaking out of the Preston through contracts with national or multinational companies. Then the council took steps to plug the leaks by switching procurement contracts to local businesses. Now the yoghurts in the council canteen come from a local supplier, while the police station does its printing with a local firm.

According to principles trialled in the US city of Cleveland, Ohio, the key to community wealth building is to turn large organisations that are rooted to the place, like hospitals, colleges, emergency services and councils, into so-called anchors. When these anchors concentrate their spending in the local economy—supporting local businesses with contracts, supporting local households by employing people from the region—the economy becomes more inclusive.

But in Morecambe, as in many coastal and rural towns, there are few anchors to shore up wealth. Without anchors,

capital like Big Local funding is at risk of floating off into thin air at the end of the cycle. Marjorie Kelly, the executive vice-president of the Democracy Collaborative, the research institute behind community wealth building, has adapted the framework for rural areas without anchors. Kelly concluded that communities in these areas can seek to create small-scale anchors by turning income, such as Big Local funding, into assets.

Kelly says: “Those who own and control assets are less subject to the whims of others, and more in control of their own economic destiny, than those dependent solely on income from external sources.”²² Assets create stability for communities and allow them to plan for the future, she says, while increasing wellbeing and connectedness.

Kelly identifies six forms of community wealth: financial capital, or money and related assets; natural capital, such as the environment and natural resources; built capital, including houses and community buildings; intellectual capital, or the stock of knowledge and innovation in a region; individual capital, which includes skills and health; and social capital, or the stock of trust, relationships, and networks that support a healthy community.

Though it came about through crisis, the emergence of the Morecambe Community Collective has strengthened social capital in the town. It has brought residents together to create their own, bottom-up strategy for how best to tackle the effects of decades of economic exclusion.

The last time I visited Morecambe in March 2018, residents were working on community initiatives to get the nearby power station and Lancaster’s two universities, which

²² Kelly, Marjorie, *Keeping Wealth Local: Shared Ownership and Wealth Control in Rural Communities*, Tellus Institute and Yellow Wood Associates, 2009, P6

are the two biggest employers in the region, to have more of an active role in the town. The doctor's surgery had plans for an event to link up with all the other organisations providing health and wellbeing to the community, so that GPs are better able to direct residents to resources. And the Exchange, under Jo Bambrough and her partner Beki Melrose, was moving forward with plans to take over empty buildings in the town and turn them into shared workspaces for art and enterprise.

West End Million was taking a more collaborative approach, working with other community groups to provide the capital needed to make these initiatives happen. The new West End Million plan draws together the local housing association, GPs, councillors and other community actors to work together towards common goals. Dan Spencer, the 28-year-old elected to chair the West End Big Local in September 2017, was philosophical about the time it took for the partnership to grow into this role: "This is the journey of Big Local. We've become more confident," he says.

Over a pint with partnership members in a local pub, Spencer said: "The West End Million now has a role in ensuring organisations can continue and helping them to thrive."

Viv Brunsten, another West End Million member, agreed: "The partnership has given us an organised voice and the opportunity to help organisations that might fall into the gaps for other funding." They've come up with a new motto, "Our community: taking action and being heard".

On the other side of the table, Brunsten turned to Mike Barr and asked if he thought that the council would get away today with removing the play park opposite their house. "Possibly not," he replied. "At the time it was just me and Gill. If it happened now we could turn around and say: 'You've taken the play equipment out, but we can afford to buy more.'"





Sacha Bedding, Dyke House Big Local, Hartlepool

CHAPTER TWO

Hartlepool

A proud moment

CALLUM HILLS NEVER IMAGINED he'd be giving speeches. But in 2017, the 21-year-old from Dyke House was invited to Newcastle for a Big Local event, where he told others about the Dyke House partnership and his role in some of the improvements in the area. "That was a proud moment," he remembers.

Hills used to live with his father and brother in Dyke House, a part of Hartlepool that falls within the top 2 per cent of deprived areas in the UK. Hills was the only one in the house who worked. Youth unemployment is 13.7 per cent in Hartlepool, compared to a north-east average of 2.8 per cent. His father was among the 26 per cent of residents who had a limiting long-term illness, compared to 15 per cent in the north-east, until his death in 2018 at the age of just 52.

I meet Hills at a building off Millbank Road, where the streets are unusually free from cars and lined with post-war semi-detached homes. Residents are served by two schools, a church, a large mosque and The Annexe, a community centre

run by the Wharton Trust in a former school building. It got its name as an annexed building to a now repurposed schoolhouse over the road.

It is in this building that the locally trusted organisation has been working closely with residents to develop the skills needed to create a resilient, resident-led local economy in Dyke House. If the West End in Morecambe had social capital waiting to be spurred to action in a crisis, in Hartlepool, building that capacity has been a process of learning and growing.

Hills has been coming to The Annexe for ten years. He started coming after community co-ordinator Teresa Driver came across him on the street on one of her drives around the area and invited him to join the youth club. He was only 12 at the time, one of five children in a household beset by addiction and unemployment. He dreamed of joining the police, even though from a young age he knew he never could. “I’d have to arrest my whole family,” he says with a grin.

These days Hills comes to youth club as a trainee youth worker through an apprentice scheme by Groundwork. “Teresa’s changed me,” he says. “Without her I wouldn’t be doing what I’m doing. I think that’s why I’m doing it—because Teresa hopes I can change the lives of others.”

Hills is the youngest member of the Dyke House Big Local partnership. He has sat on the resident-led board since Dyke House became a Big Local area in 2012. But he might never have got the chance if the managers of the Wharton Trust hadn’t dedicated time and energy to building his capacity as a partnership member.

The Wharton Trust has been an active charity in Dyke House since it was established in 1990. It had always been intended to be a community hub serving the interests of local

residents, but just before Teresa Driver joined in 2010, the relationship between the Wharton Trust and the community had broken down.

Residents were invited to contribute ideas for a planned six-month refurbishment of the building. But this ended in frustration when the building reopened, and locals discovered that there was no cafe or gym as they had been promised. Residents had asked for local tradespeople to be hired for the building works, but the procurement process was so complicated that no local firms got work. They requested a music room, and though one was built, there was no money left in the pot for instruments. “People did not get what they wanted,” Driver says. “Residents were disappointed. They didn’t like us, they said there was no point talking to us because we don’t do what they want.”

In the shake-up that followed, the Wharton Trust looked for a new manager. They found one in Sacha Bedding, a community worker who believed that the Trust should take a different approach to meeting residents’ needs. “When I arrived we had a lot of people doing things for other people. One, it’s unsustainable, and two, it gives people no sense of ownership over their own lives,” Bedding says. “We needed to create structures that give people access to services, but the responsibility lies with them.”

Bedding looked at ways to deepen the Trust’s relationship with the community. He wanted to create stronger links with active members and invite them to make decisions, rather than trying to spread the Trust’s resources more thinly. “We chose to take a different approach, which was brave because neighbourhood funding looked like it was on its way out in the recession,” he says.

The Wharton Trust had already taken advantage of

community-organising training delivered by Locality under the former Prime Minister David Cameron’s government. Government figures show that over 6,422 community organisers and volunteers have been mobilised in England to date—exceeding Cameron’s original target of 5,000. Community organisers were trained to listen to neighbours in their area and encourage action around the issues that mattered most.

But listening wasn’t enough. “You still have to pay people,” Driver says. “Youth Clubs are hard work, especially on estates like those Big Local fund. A group of volunteers couldn’t run a Youth Club. It needs people who are one step away from the community, so they have the confidence to challenge the way things are done—so they start leading as well.”

When the Big Local programme was announced in Dyke House, the Wharton Trust advertised for residents to come and join the partnership. At first, some councillors came down. Older people in the community who felt they had done a lot in the past—building or painting things for the community—wanted to spend the money on similar activities. Others travelled across town to put in bids to run sports programmes.

Driver and Bedding pushed back. “We weren’t very popular,” Teresa says. “Me and Sacha were trying to explain that it wasn’t a fund for people who deliver other stuff across the town to come here and deliver the same thing in Dyke House. In time, if there is a need, then we know who these people are, but it wasn’t going to happen the way they wanted it to.”

Rachel Rowney from Local Trust says this experience is typical of many areas in the early days of the programme. In Big Local meetings in 2010, venues would be filled with community development officers, youth outreach workers,

neighbourhood managers, police community support officers and other professionals with a link back to the local authority.

Then as the councils shed employees, Local Trust started getting phone calls from residents asking if they could use Big Local money to fund wardens and neighbourhood managers themselves. “Between 2012 and 2014 there was this feeling of emergency, almost,” Rowney says.

Over time, communities adjusted to having fewer resources and fewer local authority officers in the neighbourhood. “Now what we’re seeing is that this activity no longer exists,” Rowney says. In Dyke House, some people forgot about the Big Local money. Others moved away. People became accustomed to the idea that Big Local didn’t work like other programmes, though many didn’t like it at first. “It’s a culture shock,” Driver says. “You’re popular in your community if there is a problem and you can fix it, but it’s hard for people to grasp if you ask them to solve their own problems.”

Jeanette Harold, a Big Local rep who has worked across many partnerships in the north-east, says the process of developing the decision-making capacity hasn’t been easy in Dyke House: “It’s slow. It’s not easy for Sacha and Teresa because they’re used to being able to make decisions on behalf of the residents.”

Eventually, nine residents came together to form a partnership. Driver and Bedding dropped training about management structures, minute-writing and administration. Instead they focused on skills such as talking to one another respectfully, rather than shouting at meetings.

“There was a huge amount of work on how to have disagreements without storming out the room, meetings with kids on knees, people running out for fag breaks, people hung-over on Saturday morning,” Bedding says. “It was a programme

dictated by the speed of learning of the people, not by well-meaning people telling them what to do.”

Members talked about how to make sure to get good value when negotiating a deal. They decided that, rather than appointing a chair, the role would be shared. Driver says: “To be honest, a lot of the group didn’t have that experience, so they wouldn’t question that. But one of our younger members said she is so glad there isn’t a chair, because she would have felt disempowered.”

Bedding and Driver play an unusually close role in facilitating the partnership in Dyke House. But their knowledge of and commitment to community organising and bottom-up practices has helped residents learn how to become more active members of their community.

Hills says that the meetings have given him the confidence to speak for himself. “Say I am talking and there are more than four people in a room. I’ll go bright red and I’ll be like, ‘Oh, god,’” Hills says. “I would just like sit back and just let them forget about us. But now I’m getting better at getting my point across and standing up for myself.”

The front line

On the day of my visit, it is Hills’ turn to chair the Dyke House Big Local meeting. First he takes me on a tour of The Annexe, which has been his second home ever since he was a teenager.

“That’s me,” Hills says, pointing to a mural of a boy taking a shot on a pool table in a room on the third floor. The mural of a long-faced, brown-haired boy looks nothing like Hills, who is round-faced and fair. “You can tell because I always stick my tongue out when I’m concentrating.”

It costs 30p to go to the youth club, which offers sessions

for different age-ranges throughout the week. Wharton Trust recently opened a homework club on a Monday that has been very popular. I ask if he thinks parents are making kids come. “I don’t think any of their parents are making them, to be honest,” he says. “Especially with the weather last week, it’s somewhere for them to come and be in the warm.”

We leave the third floor, passing a light switch smashed in by a student from the pupil referral unit earlier that day. The unit is for students excluded from Dyke House Secondary School, the mammoth academy a street away. It rents space at The Annexe from 9am until 3pm, but sometimes they don’t make it to 3pm. After the light-switch incident, today’s classes finish around lunchtime.

In the large front room of The Annexe, partnership member Andrea Peart shows me the kitchen, where she prepares hot dinners for up to 12 people at a time. “Mince and dumps,” she says. “Though it can be a squeeze to fit more than twelve dumplings in that oven.”

The freezer is full of food rescued from landfill, either donated directly from the supermarket or through schemes like FareShare. A plate of Peart’s finest mince and dumps cost £1. Tea and coffee used to be free, until the volunteers caught people stealing coffee granules. Now there is a sign saying, ‘We no longer provide free tea and coffee’. But the jars are still full someone has relented and filled them anyway.

In the back room, Annexe regular Michael Hunter is filling out his benefits card with potential jobs he finds on the internet, just as he has done every day since he lost his job at Stadium Plastics, a local plastics factory that closed down in 2008 with the loss of 300 jobs. He had worked there for more than 17 years.

Dyke House Big Local funds an employment officer called Jade Bromby for 24 hours a week to help people like Hunter meet their benefit requirements. Bromby spends her time sitting with residents in the front room of The Annexe, on hand to answer questions and provide advice. Her records show she has helped 150 people apply to work, but that's not counting the repeat customers. Some, like Hunter, she helps every week.

The jobs available in Hartlepool are mostly unskilled: in shops, caring for the elderly, or cleaning. An IT suite next door is used to run site-safety training for people who want to work in construction, but Hills says that even after the training, it can be hard to get a job in construction unless you know someone.

Just 25 per cent of people of working age in Dyke House are in full-time employment, compared to 31 per cent in the north-east. At 62, Hunter worries he's too old to find work. He never hears back from the applications he sends. But there is volunteer work for him at The Annexe, helping Peart cook for a group of elderly residents on a Wednesday.

As we are talking, the daily FareShare delivery arrives and Hunter makes his excuses to join residents sorting through panniers of bread rolls, crusty loaves, buns and pastries and, today, piles of bagged carrots. Peart presses a four-pack of wholegrain rolls and a bag of tangerines in my hand and tells me to stash them away as it will all be gone later.

The Wharton Trust doesn't advertise the community cafe—even though that's essentially what they are running—because it might take away business from a popular, locally owned takeaway at the bottom of the street, Starvin Marvins. But dependence on takeaways is having an adverse effect on the health of residents. There are 118 fast-food and takeaway outlets in the town, compared to the national average of 81

for a town the size of Hartlepool.²³ A quarter of reception-age children in Dyke House are overweight and the figure rises to 38.7 per cent for children in Key Stage 3. Poor access to a healthy diet is a matter of life and death in Hartlepool: there is a difference of 10.25 years in life expectancy between the most and least deprived wards.

The FareShare delivery will also provide food for the evening's youth club. Hills shows me the kitchen where he teaches some of the young people how to cook simple meals. "I can't even tell you how many times I cooked in this kitchen when I came here," he says.

Hills is proud to work. He left school at 17 and has had five jobs since, managing to stay off benefits apart from a year and a half. "I was looking every single day," he remembers. As a youth worker, he is one of four employees of Wharton Trust looking after up to 25 children.

He joined the partnership after being encouraged to come along by Driver. "Ever since then I've always been interested in the meetings. I try not to miss a meeting," he says. "I think it's just because I always liked helping people and that's exactly what Big Local is—helping people."

The Big Local meeting is held in the IT suite. Hills opens with a list of attendees and absences. Then partnership members talk through the order of business. Driver gives an update on universal credit, noting that The Annexe is busier at the moment as people are using the computers to switch their benefits to the new system online.

Stan Taylor, an elderly partnership member, asks if The Annexe is equipped to cope with the influx of people. Driver

²³ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Hartlepool Action Lab community research, <https://www.hartlepoolactionlab.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Hartlepool-Action-Lab-community-research.pdf>, page 11.

notes that they have Bromby, the part-time community employment officer, and she has trained Hills and another partnership member to teach residents how to sign up for benefits using the new system, rather than doing it for them. But it's clear the partnership is helping families on the brink.

Economic growth of any kind is a distant memory in Dyke House. Instead the partnership is acting as a safety net for the poorest in the community through schemes co-designed with residents. Members have experimented with selling individual toilet rolls and small bags of instant coffee and tea for a few pence at a time, for those who can't afford to buy in supermarket-sized lots.

This has evolved into a volunteering scheme called Bags of Help, where residents can get household essentials—cheap washing powder, a little washing-up liquid—in return for an hour's work. The scheme resembles time banking in rural parts of the US, where time is more abundant than money. States such as Michigan and Missouri have enacted legislation in support of these time banks, which give people credit for helping others that they can access when they need assistance.²⁴

Since the closure of the local credit union in Hartlepool, residents have lent money to each other. "If someone has a win on the bingo, they share it," Bedding says. In regions where the economy has failed and residents are more dependent on government support, alternative economies can emerge. Recognising these exchanges as valuable, even when they are not valued by mainstream economics or by money, can aid the development of a more inclusive economy.

The Democracy Collaborative tells the story of the Lakota Native American Indian tribe on the Pine Ridge reservation in

South Dakota. The tribespeople are financially dependent on the federal government, but the tribe has 180 locally owned businesses creating revenue and employment. The tribe has gone through a process of adapting community wealth building to fit with its values.

"As dependency on federal support became our reality, an informal market emerged, operating microenterprise across the reservation, producing goods and services in response to the lack of mainstream businesses," writes Stephanie Gutierrez, the co-founder of Hope Nation, an organisation that works with Native American tribes to build social capital and support the creation of a more inclusive economy. "These 'businesses' show the demand that resides on the reservation."²⁵

For the Lakota people, community wealth building starts not with anchors or with assets but with one another. There is still trading, bartering and the selling of goods, and they recognise the value in human relationships and interactions as much as in physical or financial entities. "To us it means having spirituality, community support, kinship, etc," writes Rae Tall. "Our survival skills became our spiritual and cultural activities."

Bedding and Driver have taken a hands-on approach to developing individual capital in Dyke House. Their commitment to a bottom-up approach has enabled residents to begin to think about fair exchange. Next, Bedding wants to go one step further and create stability and sustainability for residents in the longer term. He has been writing grant applications to invest in built capital that will provide revenue for residents long after the Big Local programme has ended. "Our hope was always that we could knit together the

²⁴ Kelly, Marjorie, *Keeping Wealth Local: Shared Ownership and Wealth Control in Rural Communities*, Tellus Institute and Yellow Wood Associates, 2009, P6

²⁵ Gutierrez, Stephanie, *Lakota Community Wealth Building Report*, Democracy Collaborative, December 2017, page 14.

opportunities locally,” he says. “Anything that the Wharton Trust been involved in, the partnership has.”

Dyke House recently won a bid to be part of the Power to Change Empowering Places scheme, a five-year programme that will invest £8 million in communities. Dyke House Big Local has committed to helping the Wharton Trust support these new businesses.

In addition, partnership members have allocated £300,000 to bring five or six properties in the area into the ownership of the Wharton Trust, to provide assets and a source of income long after Big Local funding has run dry. The Wharton Trust is using money from the government-funded Community Organisers Expansion Programme to train the tenants of the new homes in the skills needed to support social action.

In Dyke House 16.2 per cent residents rent their dwelling from a private landlord, compared to 27.3 per cent in the north-east. Bedding says that means money is leaking out to landlords as far away as Australia.

“You have some really crappy individual landlords, private landlords, because housing was so cheap and they are part of portfolios,” Bedding says. “That attracts people who are living anywhere, and they have no sense of affinity for the place. So that transient community can destroy the social fabric much quicker than the type of owner.”

The plan is to charge a fair rent to live in the properties, plus a contractual obligation in the tenancy agreement to say that residents will be committed to social action. While these plans are in their infancy, numerous studies have confirmed the importance of assets in local economies.

The plan’s success will depend upon the ability of residents to see themselves within a new kind of local economy, less reliant on state support or low-paid jobs. The

residents of Dyke House can start to build chains of value within this new economy. What starts with ownership over local houses could grow into a fully-fledged community café responding to the demand for healthy, home-cooked food, or a new credit union providing fair-interest loans. While Big Local funding is a starting point, it takes a well-connected and knowledgeable person to, as Bedding says, “knit together the opportunities” that build the foundations from which community wealth can grow.



CHAPTER THREE

Grays Riverside

Supporting entrepreneurs

IT'S FRIDAY NIGHT ON AN INDUSTRIAL ESTATE in Grays, a small town on the Thames estuary, and all the units have closed their shutters for the weekend except one. At 8pm a car pulls up and two young men get out and slip through the only open door into the warmth of Uncxt Studios.

Uncxt Studios has been open since May 2017. It is the dream of Connor Hammond, aka SmallzDeep, a 25-year-old grime artist. It was realised with startup funding from Grays Riverside Big Local, a partnership in an area where jobs are abundant, yet young people are still excluded from the economy.

The story of Grays Riverside demonstrates that an inclusive, resilient economy must do more than offer jobs to young people. By empowering individuals to use their skills for positive change, rather than forcing them into low-paid work, the Grays Riverside Big Local partnership has created networks of social capital in the area, which make communities more resilient to economic shock.

Hammond was born in Essex but left school and home when he was 16. He travelled to the south-west, where he lived on the streets and had multiple run-ins with the police over weapons and drugs offences. After a spell in prison just after he turned 18, he realised he needed to turn his life around: “That’s when all of my efforts went into being a recording artist.”

He began to make a name for himself as SmallzDeep, getting played on Radio 1 and mixing with some of the big names in grime. When he eventually came back to Grays, he found that opportunities for young people had all but disappeared and that violent crime was rising. Knife crime increased by 21 per cent nationally in 2017,²⁶ and Essex as a county saw a 26 per cent rise in knife crime between June 2016 and June 2017.²⁷ “Something’s gone wrong for youths to be stabbing each other in the chest,” Hammond says.

Grays sits on the Thames estuary in the administrative area of Thurrock, which came bottom of a national wellbeing survey for England in 2012. When the Guardian visited to find out what residents hated so much about living there, one said it was “one big cesspit”.²⁸

Thinking about that article still riles Andrew Blakey, the chair of Grays Riverside Big Local: “That really angered me. Because it’s not true, it’s absolutely not true.” Blakey was leading a church in Grays when Big Local arrived in town. He offered to give the reps a tour of the area. Not long afterwards, he became the chair of the partnership.

It was during these early days of community meetings and surveys that Blakey was surprised to learn how diverse Grays had become: “Our local primary school has 49 languages spoken, our nursery had 39. That diversity is the sort of thing we would find in inner cities, but we’re outside the M25.”

Thurrock has grown as families became displaced from East London during the building of the 2012 Olympic Park, and London borough housing associations, seeking to repurpose residential property, re-housed them in Essex.²⁹ Between 2001 and 2011 the population of Thurrock grew 10 per cent, with a 6.7 per cent increase in households, making it one of the most populated districts in the country.

The people I spoke to described a culture where immigrants take the jobs available at the Amazon plant and in the docks, while white working-class boys get into trouble. “If we go to the library now there will be loads of Asian and black kids inside studying,” says Neil Woodbridge, the chief executive of Thurrock Lifestyle Solutions, a local community interest company (CIC) that helps people with disabilities live normal lives. “Outside you will have Connor lookalikes with a can of special brew and a spliff. What’s that about?”

“The problems have got worse,” Hammond says. “Some of these kids haven’t had the best lives, so they get caught up in things they shouldn’t. You can’t blame them, of course they do, because they see what others have around them and they want that too, so they do what they have to do to get money.”

When Hammond was younger the area had a couple of youth clubs, which have since closed, while an AstroTurf playing field is gated off so only paying customers can use it.

²⁶ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/yearendingseptember2017/latest-violent-crime-figures-continue-to-present-a-complex-picture>

²⁷ http://www.echo-news.co.uk/news/15993619. Kids_must_know_the_affects_of_knife_crime/

²⁸ Davies, Lizzy, ‘It’s one big cesspit here’: Thurrock, the country’s capital of misery, The Guardian, July 25, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/jul/25/thurrock-capital-misery>

²⁹ Minutes from the briefing note for the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner, Aveyal Public Meeting, January 29, 2018, <http://www.essex.pfcc.police.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/20180125-Briefing-Note-on-Thurrock-District-Public-Version.doc>

Hammond decided he would start by opening a recording studio, partly to give himself something to do but also to occupy other young people: “I thought, ‘Why not just open something where youths have a chance to express themselves in a positive way?’”

First, he had to raise money for rent. One day, Hammond was watching Dragons’ Den and a man came on with a pitch for a gadget that played a trumpet sound to congratulate a child for flushing the toilet. He was asking for £40,000. “I thought, ‘What! This guy wants £40,000 for this?’ I couldn’t believe it. I thought, if he can do it, I can.” So he started a Kickstarter.

Posted in September 2015, it read: “We have started a Kickstarter fund to set up a Recording Studio in the Thurrock area for the whole of Essex and surrounding areas, with 1-2 days a week specifically for the youth of Thurrock and Essex to express themselves via music and keep off the streets completely free of charge.”

No sooner was the post online than Hammond got a call from the Grays Riverside Big Local, asking him if he would like to take part in an event that they had set up to encourage entrepreneurship in the area.

By this time the Grays Riverside Big Local was well underway with its first plan, which set out five priorities for the area: enterprise, environment, events, young people and communication. The residents decided to put £1000 a year for two years towards Thurrock Soup, a pitching event based on an initiative in Detroit, where would-be entrepreneurs compete for a small amount of startup funding.

Hammond had never given a business pitch before. Woodbridge remembers seeing him for the first time that night, going through his notes on a scrap of paper before the

meeting. “The thing about Essex people is that we could sell oil to the sheikhs,” Woodbridge jokes. “We’re business minded, there’s an entrepreneurial mindset here.”

Sure enough, Hammond’s pitch won that night in a unanimous vote. A representative from UnLtd, another Lottery-funded programme that supports social entrepreneurs, told Hammond he was eligible for UnLtd funding, which brought in another £5,000. Most of this early funding went towards the cost of securing the unit, a former hairdresser’s store cupboard that Hammond did up himself with layers of slate-coloured paint and foam to muffle the sound. He says: “There was a big part of me that didn’t even know if I could pull it off.”

Woodbridge was more confident. “Connor is a bit further from the mainstream of you or I,” he tells me on the edges of a community health day at a leisure centre just outside of Grays. “What I’m saying to Connor is you can be a role model. We’re at a time when 50 per cent of people have degrees, but not all of those degrees are useful. I believe there’s another way. And I think it’s entrepreneurial.”

By this time Woodbridge’s business, Thurrock Lifestyle Solutions, had been elected as the locally trusted organisation for Grays Riverside. It won after Woodbridge proposed that, rather than keeping the annual £5,000 fee, Thurrock Lifestyle Solutions would keep the money in a trust, so that by the end of the ten years the £50,000 could be used to sustain the work of the community.

Woodbridge also stepped in to become Hammond’s mentor. He taught him about accounting, cashflow and how to have a unique selling point. But the first year has been hard on Hammond. “I worked as hard as I could for a year with the youth sessions,” he says. “I was working 18-hour days. I

had to do these free sessions but it has to make money. I was thinking, my girlfriend is going to dump me because I never see her!”

Hammond has an open door for young people who might have got caught up in drugs or violence. “We don’t get a load of youths in and tell them what to do, because who am I to tell them what to do?” he says. “But the fact that I am young as well, and not a 45-year-old white man who’s never done anything—they listen to me and they feel they can tell me in confidence.”

“It’s not about making people megastars,” Woodbridge says. “We’re not Simon Cowell, there’s a lot of hanging about and talking. He asks what they’ve been up to and the kids talk to him.”

When Woodbridge heard that the police, fire and crime commissioner was offering grant money to initiatives that help stop crime, he suggested Hammond apply. Just a week before my visit, Hammond found out that he had been provisionally granted over £14,800 through the scheme. The money will allow him to take on his first employee, a local DJ called Tom “Kirby T” Berry who has been helping him out with social media for some time, to upgrade the studio equipment.

“The whole idea of the studio wasn’t to make big artists, but to give some hope and let them know that there are some options in life that aren’t illegal,” Hammond says. “Kirby is a good example of that, he put some work in for a year and half and now he has a job. In our eyes that is successful.”

“This is going to change a big part of my life,” says Berry. “I was doing insurance in a call centre, but I got made redundant, and I was talking to Smallz that whole time and he had the brainwave about training me.”

On the Friday night I visit, Hammond, Berry and a

younger man called Dan Green, who raps under the name of Stanza, are waiting to meet Capo Lee, a grime artist from London who got in touch with Hammond online to ask if he could help out with workshops. Lee is something of a star, known for his offbeat rapping style. His talent has brought him a sponsorship deal with Adidas and modelling jobs for ASOS.

While we wait, Green talks about the two months he worked in the Amazon factory before he got fired for sleeping on the job. He tries to describe what it’s like in the warehouse: “It’s huge, and on the top floor where I was there were all these robots spinning around and around.” Green has since picked up some work as a painter, but it’s clear from the speed and precision of his lyrics that he spends the majority of his time working on his music.

When Lee arrives, he and Green regard each other shyly across the room. They start talking about all the commercial studios that are popping up for artists in London. One has just opened in a Nando’s in Soho, offering applicants the chance to record their own music with help of an in-house engineer. While there’s nothing new about brands aping young talent to sell things, it’s a far cry from this late-night meeting at a homegrown studio.

Lee suggests he and Green record something together—Lee will take the chorus and Green the verse. “Have you got something in your phone?” Hammond prompts Green. Green grins from ear to ear and starts scrolling through the pages and pages of notes he has prepared for this moment. As the track is beginning to take shape, my cab arrives. Hammond sees me to the car and tells me he’s pleased with how the night is going: “I would have loved something like that when I was starting out.”

Creating safe spaces

Uncxt Studio is by its nature inclusive, giving young people a chance to be involved in making something when they might otherwise be unoccupied, or getting into trouble. Yet it also exists outside the mainstream economy, in a town where plenty of jobs are already available in warehouses down on the wharf, working for businesses like Amazon, which sends profits back to Seattle, or for the London Gateway, which was built by Dubai.

In the US, the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE) has done lots of work on the idea that once an economic system is corrupted, it is impossible to fix: “We recognize that the only path to transformation is to find or create safe spaces outside the dominant system, where something new can emerge.”³⁰

BALLE has discovered that more sustainable local economies often start from a single person, or from an ecosystem of individuals and institutions that come together and choose to collaborate. Thurrock Soup is not the only initiative by the Grays Riverside partnership to help people start their own businesses. It has funded a school for social entrepreneurs at a local college, providing specialist training for businesses in their early years. Another £35,000 has gone towards supporting the Lightship, a cafe in the park at Grays Beach.

One morning, on what feels like the first day of spring, I meet Geoff Stringfellow on the benches outside the Lightship Cafe that he and other volunteers restored by hand. The cafe provides food and toilets for an extensive children’s play area

on Grays Beach that was constructed with funding from Veolia, a transnational waste management company, when it built the giant biomass plant next door. In the summer, the park can attract more than a thousand parents and children, their squeals drowning out the creaking and spluttering of the plant.

The cafe in Grays Beach Park was run by the council until two years ago, but was never open at the weekends during winter. Before Big Local arrived in the area, Blakey, who would become the Grays Riverside partnership chair, had stepped in to run it with a church group through the winter. When Grays Riverside Big Local heard it was available they negotiated a three-year lease at a peppercorn rent starting from May 1, 2017, and offered the residents a chance for proper investment in the facilities to build a sustainable business for the long term.

Stringfellow had just gone through cancer and recovery when he joined the partnership. An energetic man with a ready smile, he has since clocked up hundreds of volunteer hours at the cafe and earned a civic award for his dedication. “I was happy to have something,” he says. “Sitting at home was no good.” Stringfellow comes every day, keeping an eye on the business side of things while hatching plans. He shows me a folder full of neat plastic wallets containing budget calculations and printouts of designs for play equipment made out of used tyres.

As we talk in the sun, partnership members Sandra Valentine and her partner Rob Payne arrive and join us on the benches. They have come to do a recce of the inside of the cafe before going off to buy some paint to redecorate. Payne, a painter by trade, has been recruited for the job. Valentine says the notion of inclusivity runs through everything the partnership does. “The cafe brings adults together through the kids,” says Valentine, who remembers coming to the park

³⁰ <https://bealocalist.org/about/how-we-work/>

when she was a child. “It sounds small, but it spreads.”

Inside, the kitchen manager works with a roster of volunteers who choose their own hours on a whiteboard rota. Once volunteers have shown their commitment, they get the chance to study for an NVQ in catering. Certificates line the wall. It’s quiet today, so cafe volunteer Kerri Thomas is busy working on her photography business on her laptop. Just a few months ago, the idea of working in a cafe, let alone building a business, would have been unthinkable for Thomas. The 21-year-old was spending most of her time caring for her mother, and the rest of it shut in her room suffering from anxiety and depression. “My room used to be my safe space,” she says. “Now I’m coming here this is my safe space. It’s helped me so much.”

In the office, partnership member Kristina Galinauskite is on the phone to Barclays, trying to work out the best banking arrangement for the Lightship as it moves towards making a profit. Galinauskite went along to an information session about the Big Local partnership because they were giving away free tote bags. She ended up on the board.

Galinauskite has since been helping set up a translation service to get leaflets about activities out into the community in different languages. “I am still gaining the confidence that I can do things,” she tells me in the cafe. Two project workers, employed by Grays Big Local, have become key to encouraging residents to take action in the community. “We do the legwork,” says John Kent, one of two project workers. Kent was council leader for Thurrock until 2017, when he got hired by Big Local. He goes to every partnership meeting and uses his network to build links with statutory organisations such as the council.

The partnership has been so successful at forging links that other people keep offering to pay for its projects. The

council liked the idea for Thurrock Soup so much they obtained funds from the Department of Work and Pensions to fund it. Then, when the Riverside Community came up with the idea of a Thurrock-based School of Social Entrepreneurs, the council offered to put in the £45,000 funding. “It’s led to a reputation for not spending money because other people see the ideas are good and sound and it gets funded by someone else,” Blakey says.

In the process, Grays Riverside is creating what might be called value chains, or chains of individuals and businesses that support one another. The term comes from the US, where a project called Wealth Works, funded by the Ford Foundation, has explored an alternative to anchors based on building up a value chain in response to demand.³¹

In Grays, the demand for youth services has started a value chain around Uncxt Studios, which gets business support from Thurrock Lifestyle Solutions and investment from Big Local. Value chains are assessed in terms of how much they can contribute to locally or regionally owned wealth. Instead of beginning with what exists and asking how it can be forced into the existing market, this framework seeks first to understand what the market needs and wants and why, then how investments can meet that demand.

This model was used successfully in the state of Wisconsin, after the loss of key employers in the paper- and cranberry-processing industries caused 40 per cent of the jobs in South Woods County to disappear virtually overnight.

Rather than trying to attract large new businesses, the

³¹ Ratner, Shanna and Markley, Deborah. Rural Wealth Creation as a sustainable economic development strategy, P5. <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=rmtQDwAAQBAJ&lpq=PA5&ots=uomVua8ERF&dq=community%2owealth%2obuilding%2ovalue%2ochains&pg=PA5#v=onepage&q=community%2owealth%2obuilding%2ovalue%2ochains&f=false>

local chamber of commerce worked with Incourage, a local community foundation, to inspire residents and businesses to take a more proactive role. The two organisations launched the community progress initiative in 2004, a strategy for changing the culture, creating business and helping people learn to become leaders. This initiative launched more than 20 different programmes, including an entrepreneurial boot camp offering mentoring and training for those wishing to start a business, which helped more than 40 businesses expand.

“They did a variety of things to build up local assets, rather than trying to replace what was lost or to attract companies,” says Marjorie Kelly of the Democracy Collaborative. “They were really successful. They upgraded the skills of people that were there.”

Creating more inclusive economies often starts with skilled and connected individuals such as Sacha Bedding, applying for multiple grants in Dyke House, or Neil Woodbridge in Grays, who introduced Hammond to funding opportunities. “I see Grays as a series of channels of activity. All I do is connect up the nodes, like this,” Woodbridge told me one afternoon. As he spoke, he mimed plugging wires into switchboard, like a telephone operator.





Conclusion

NOT LONG AFTER MY FIRST VISIT to Morecambe, Gill Taylor, the resident who was spurred to act by the council closure of a neighbourhood play park, sent me a video called ‘the parable of the blobs and squares’ to explain how she feels about the Big Local experiment.

In the video, Brian Blessed narrates an animated tale of the squares—grey plasticine shapes with faces representing the Government—and blobs, which are colourful, malleable characters. These blobs represent the people and the problems that can’t be quantified by the metrics used by the squares. After the failure of several approaches to tackling the problem blobs, the squares give money directly to the blobs to work out their own problems, but the reports and analysis they expect in return end up turning the blobs more square-like. In the process, the blobs lose the vitality and the energy that made them blobs in the first place.

To measure the Big Local programme using inclusive growth would be an exercise in trying to turn blobs into squares. Rather than seeking top-down, square-like solutions, successful Big Local partnerships seek solutions within the problems. The problem faced by many Big Local areas, and the reason these areas have been chosen for funding, is that the

economy no longer works as it should. Economic growth has not only failed to improve the lot of the poorest in society, but eluded whole towns.

The mainstream view, including the all-party parliamentary group on inclusive growth, is that increasing jobs will give people currently excluded from economic growth a sense that life is improving. But this isn't happening. Widespread employment, pushed up by precarious jobs and zero-hours contracts, has not improved overall economic wellbeing. A two-year nationwide research programme led by Co-operatives UK into community economic development concluded: "The economy is a system whose end goal is, after all, human wellbeing—within environmental limits. This economic system might need to produce profit or growth as a way of achieving that end goal. But growth is not the end goal."³²

In the US, Gar Alperovitz, co-founder of the Democracy Collaborative, has written extensively of the perils of pursuing growth for growth's sake. Constant growth threatens our environment, he writes. The natural world has finite limits and cannot sustain eternal exponential consumption.

Neither can communities. In the Big Local areas I visited, economic growth was failing to have any obvious benefits. As noted earlier, an Amazon fulfillment plant in Essex brought with it jobs, but young people found the jobs so unfulfilling they would rather be collecting benefits. In Morecambe and Hartlepool, national economic growth figures belied the high levels of local unemployment, which resulted in poverty so entrenched that community groups had stepped in to feed and clothe those in need.

This situation is expected to worsen in the coming decades as the UK's national income, once shared with labour through wages, is concentrated more in capital, or in wealth owned by individuals and organisations. This so-called 'paradox of plenty' means that even when the economy grows, capital is held in fewer hands and benefits fewer people.

To create more resilient communities, residents must have their own reserves of capital to draw upon when the economy takes a dive. Yet in the last decade, the government approach to local economic development has been the withdrawal of resources and capital from local authorities, in the hope that communities will step in to fill the void.

While some regard the withdrawal of state support as an opportunity for communities to have more of a say over their local economy, the reality has been under-resourced and unprepared groups of residents managing crises. Rachel Rowney from Local Trust questions whether that opportunity should exist: "Some of the areas see it as something that has happened that they need to deal with. Those same people were also selected for the programme because they had been forgotten."

In Morecambe, the crisis that emerged from the withdrawal of state support from an already fragile economy provided the catalyst for the building of a more inclusive local economy. But it is not desirable for areas to face a crisis before change occurs. A framework for building a more inclusive, sustainable economy is needed if communities are equipped to make changes before they reach breaking point.

In areas of economic decline, it can take an outsider or outside institution to partner with individuals to create change. "There needs to be some kind of catalytic agent," Marjorie Kelly from the Democracy Collaborative says. "It often comes from outside the community but it partners with

³² Co-operatives UK, Community Economic Development: Lessons from two years' action research, October 2017, page 8. https://www.uk.coop/sites/default/files/uploads/attachments/ced_report_2017.pdf

them. When we went into a community, we did it hand in hand with local organisations. We would bring intellectual capital—asking what are the ideas from elsewhere that can be used and how can you build the social capital? Those two often come first: intellectual and social.”

In the case studies presented here, I have demonstrated the power of individuals partnering with communities to create change. In Hartlepool, Sacha Bedding and Teresa Driver dedicated time and resources to protecting Big Local funding and working with residents to get to a point where they could make decisions for themselves. In Essex, Neil Woodbridge uses the power of his network to support the Grays Riverside partnership and connect it to other sources of funding. Many other Big Local partnerships benefit from paying project managers with expertise to carry out the plans of residents.

These individuals support social capital that already exists with a community. In places where there are market opportunities like the ones explored by entrepreneurs in Grays, this can create value chains of individuals and businesses supporting one another. But in Hartlepool, where market opportunities are fewer, communities are moving towards assets such as houses to keep wealth in the community after Big Local ends. The key to all of this activity is the decentralisation of power, so that communities are able to make decisions about their local area based on need.

The notion that power over public services should be decentralised to create more resilient economies is not new. A 2013 discussion paper by David Boyle and Michael Harris about this idea, called *The Challenge of Co-Production*, recognised that individuals and social networks are assets in a community whose input can strengthen and transform the local economy.

As far back as 2009, the economist Robin Murray

described co-production as “the new social economy”. Murray believed that conditions were emerging to accelerate its coming, such as the withdrawal of state support, rising obesity and the ageing population.³³ He based his ideas on the work of the human rights lawyer Edgar Cahn, the same man who originally wrote the parable of the blobs and the squares sent to me by Gill Taylor.³⁴

Co-production gained popularity in the UK at the same time as David Cameron introduced his idea of a Big Society that would fill the gaps in government funding presented by austerity. Cameron believed he could turn “passive recipients of state services” into “active agents of their own life” by withdrawing state support and training community managers.³⁵ He said: “We must use the state to remake society.” Boyle and Harris describe co-production as an even more radical proposition: using society to remake the state.

Neither is possible without a framework through which a more democratic economy emerges. This framework can be found in community wealth building—a middle ground between dependence on the state and dependence on corporate capitalism, which seeks to attract multinational corporations to deprived areas using tax cuts and low wages.

The Big Local partnerships I visited were battling a complex set of needs that would ordinarily fall to the state to address, though residents did not have the same wealth of expertise, knowledge and resources. In all three cases, Big Local provided the opportunity to develop new skills and knowledge in the community, to strengthen existing networks and, in one instance, to move towards acquiring built assets.

³³ Murray, R. *Danger and Opportunity: Crisis and the New Social Economy*, NESTA, 2009

³⁴ Cahn, Edgar S. *No More Throw-Away People: The Co-Production Imperative*, Essential Books, 2000

³⁵ Cameron, D. Speech. 29 January 2007

Many other UK communities have had to navigate austerity without Big Local funding. Very often their fortunes rely on the social capital of the people without their community to raise money to buy assets. Since 2009, almost 120,000 people have invested over £100 million to support 350 community businesses throughout the UK. Crowdfunder, a crowdfunding platform started in 2010 to support grassroots movements, has raised over £50 million. The Government has committed to creating a UK Shared Prosperity Fund to support communities after the UK leaves the EU, to fill the gap left by the European Structural and Investment Funds, yet only in the name of raising productivity.³⁶

By giving the most deprived communities £1m, Big Local is a starting point for many communities to redesign the economy based on local needs, not on top-down ideas about growth and productivity. But communities cannot work out how to do this in a vacuum. It is critical that Big Local partnerships are given access to frameworks, knowledge and individuals who can help them reimagine the future of their communities at a time when local economies are failing and state support is being withdrawn.

For many communities, Big Local is more than an experiment—it's a rare opportunity for people excluded from economic growth to create a more democratic, decentralised and resilient system at the very moment in which the present system is failing. This opportunity is not to be taken lightly in a world that has witnessed the rise of populist causes, such as the election of President Donald Trump and the UK's decision to leave the EU. Democracy may depend upon it.

³⁶ Civil Society Strategy, Cabinet Office, page 58 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/732765/Civil_Society_Strategy_-_building_a_future_that_works_for_everyone.pdf

