



Local Trust | Big Local

# Beyond age

Why communities are investing  
in young people's futures

Antony Mason, Intergenerational Foundation

## **About the Intergenerational Foundation**

The Intergenerational Foundation (IF) is an independent, non-party-political charity that exists to protect the rights of younger and future generations in British policy-making. IF is calling for sustainable long-term policies that are fair to all – the old, the young and those to come.

# Local Trust

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This essay is dedicated to  
John Monk MBE, of Coastal Community  
Challenge, for his lifetime of service to  
young people and the community.



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## FOREWORD FROM LOCAL TRUST

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BIG LOCAL IS ONE OF THE MOST radical and exciting grant programmes ever launched by a major lottery funder. Between 2010 and 2012, the National Lottery Community 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 residents organised themselves locally to plan and manage that funding, involving the wider community in the decision-making process.

Beyond that, the rules, constraints and priorities that define Big Local 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 fifteen 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 that Big Local areas have chosen to support reflect the diversity of the communities themselves, including everything from building affordable homes to tackling antisocial behaviour; creating or preserving community facilities, parks and sports centres; launching new training and employment schemes; tackling local health and environmental issues; and addressing community cohesion. Most importantly, through their initiatives, residents of Big Local areas have collectively developed the skills, networks and confidence to continue to lead their areas into the future.

Many Big Local areas have prioritised the needs of young people — funding places to meet, mental health support, leisure opportunities or access to training and opportunities. Often, the allocation of resources to these sorts of activities comes in response to a perception of the growing gaps in local provision for young people as statutory agencies withdraw, centralise services or disinvest from peripheral areas; thus highlighting the often stark differences in priorities between those making the decisions that affect communities, and the issues of importance to the residents of communities themselves.

What is interesting about many Big Local areas' willingness to invest in young people is that, typically, the groups of local people most active in Big Local are not themselves particularly young— the largest group of active participants in Big Local are residents aged 45 to 64. This suggests that, perhaps, some of the accepted narratives about intergenerational divides and conflict might not present a complete picture of what is going on, particularly in areas coping with wider social and economic challenges.

We were therefore delighted to be able to invite the Intergenerational Foundation to partner with us in commissioning an essay to explore this topic in more depth.

This is the latest essay in a series in which Local Trust has invited a range of writers, thinkers and researchers to reflect on the experience of Big Local areas and on the lessons they may provide for wider debates taking place around shared prosperity, community and place.

Matt Leach  
Chief executive  
Local Trust

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## FOREWORD FROM THE INTERGENERATIONAL FOUNDATION

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All human societies want the best for their children, and, in the broad scheme of things, this compulsion runs down through the generations.

There is nothing new in this. Edmund Burke summarised this succinctly in around 1790 when he wrote that society is “a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.”<sup>1</sup>

There are unwritten rules about how this should work which can be called the “intergenerational social contract. Essentially, each generation should leave to the next a world that is as good as, if not better than, the one that they inherited. Matching up to the aspirations of this contract can be called “intergenerational justice”.

The Intergenerational Foundation (IF) exists to promote intergenerational justice.<sup>2</sup> One of its central goals is to persuade policy-makers to think in the long term, to avoid short-term fixes to please the electorate at the expense of younger and future generations.

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund Burke (1790), *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

<sup>2</sup> There is a distinction to be made between “intergenerational justice”—the fair or unfair distribution of assets and treatment between generations—and “intergenerational practice” which seeks practical ways to promote good relationships between the young and the old. Big Local areas do a great deal in the field of intergenerational practice, for example, when all generations are invited to join workshops, mentoring schemes and afternoon tea clubs, or to partake in coach trips, fêtes, fairs and Christmas parties. Although that aspect of their work is not ignored in this essay, the main focus is on intergenerational justice, and what communities are doing for young people.

In IF's view, the intergenerational social contract is, if not exactly broken, at least under a great deal of strain, largely because of promises and assumptions made over the last half-century or so. In short, baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) had it good, and younger generations today, by contrast, have got a raw deal. This can be seen in such areas as:

- **Housing:** those of the baby boomer generation who managed to get on the property ladder (many of them helped by Margaret Thatcher's Right to Buy their council houses) have seen property values soar exponentially, pricing young people out of the market, and collaterally pushing up costs for those who have to rent, while the public housing that was sold has not been replaced.
- **Employment:** it may not have seemed like it at the time, but the baby boomers enjoyed relatively good job prospects, with the potential of durable careers in trades and professions. National unemployment figures today may be low, but they mask the fact that many of the jobs are low-paid and insecure, and often based on zero-hours contracts.
- **Benefits and pensions:** benefit cuts have hit the younger working-age generation disproportionately. By contrast, welfare for the baby boomers and the older generations has been maintained (without counterbalancing for other age groups), such as the winter fuel payment, and pensions uniquely protected by the triple lock that ensures an annual increase of at least 2.5%.
- **University tuition fees:** whereas baby boomers could go to university for free, today's younger generation

accumulates debts of over £50,000, which grow because of an interest rate well above the bank rate, and which graduates are likely to be burdened with for most of their working lives, until the debt is written off after 30 years.

- Short-termism: governments are predisposed to think in the short term, an unfortunate consequence of the democratic electoral cycle of five years or less. To achieve desirable results quickly, a government may, for instance, build hospitals using buy-now-pay-later private finance initiatives (PFIs), which cost less to the Treasury in the short term. But the contracts may be so poorly negotiated that they leave a much greater burden to future taxpayers in the long term, perhaps when the hospital in question is no longer of benefit to them. Cuts to youth services can be seen as short-termism: there is plenty of evidence that the negative consequences of these cuts have major impacts on the lives and outcomes of many vulnerable young people in need of support and guidance, with a long-term knock-on effect on—and cost to—society as a whole. Short-term policy-making can also have a damaging impact on the environment, which potentially affects all future generations—with perhaps catastrophic consequences.

To date, political parties pander to the interests of older generations, knowing that the grey vote is disproportionately powerful, both numerically and in its willingness to show up at the ballot box. Young people below the age of 18 have no vote, and many younger voters can feel so disenchanted and disengaged with the political process that they fail to vote: those aged 18 to 24 are 26% less likely to vote in a general

election than those aged 65-plus.<sup>3</sup> You could argue that, by failing to vote, they do a disservice to themselves, but a democratic society should, surely, do all it can to ensure that all sections of society are properly represented.

When the Intergenerational Foundation was asked to contribute to the Local Trust's essay series, it made the following proposal:

Intergenerational fault-lines can be seen across the UK, exacerbated by austerity, benefits cuts and high housing costs. Generations are living increasingly apart, undermining traditional assumptions about mutual support, and with the risk of aggravating intergenerational prejudices and resentment.

Being aware of the respective outlooks of other generations can help to mitigate the potential for intergenerational tensions and lay the foundations for projects to address the issue.

So the questions to explore are: to what extent are local communities aware of intergenerational fault lines? Do they feel there are generational divides? If so, are these divides becoming more acute? When given the ability to allocate resources and make real decisions—as is the case with Big Local—how do people respond to these problems in their own neighbourhoods?

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<sup>3</sup> Based on the general election of 2017, when the youth turnout was unusually high (aged 18–24 years, 61%; aged 65-plus, 87%). Source: British Social Attitudes: “Why Turnout Increased in the 2017 General Election”; <http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39222/why-turnout-increased-in-the-2017-general-election.pdf>





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# INTRODUCTION

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## Stepping into the gap

ALTHOUGH THEY MAY NOT HAVE BEEN labelled as “intergenerational”, concerns for the wellbeing and the futures of young people have ranked high in the priorities identified by almost all Big Local areas when formulating a vision of what they wanted to achieve with their £1 million. This was certainly the case in the four Big Local areas that are the focus of this report: Stoke North (Stoke-on-Trent), Church Hill (Redditch), the Coastal Community Challenge (Mablethorpe, Trusthorpe and Sutton on Sea in Lincolnshire) and Hackney Wick in East London.<sup>4</sup>

What is happening here? Why are communities, when given freedom and control over the distribution of funding,

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, the first of five objectives in the original plan devised by Stoke North for their application to the programme was “Involving and recognising young people”. Hackney Wick Big Local lists three prime objectives: “improve wellbeing; create opportunities for young people; build community connections”. In Church Hill, the five priorities included: “developing opportunities for young people; and developing opportunities for children”. The priorities for Coastal Community Challenge included: “To support all young people to recognise their full potential, by increasing their job and life chances.”

prioritising the welfare of young people? You could answer that this is normal: aren't all communities worried about their young? But there is a particular sense of crisis and urgency in deprived communities.<sup>5</sup>

And this has been exacerbated by the withdrawal of funding from government (both national and local), notably during the recent era of austerity. Often, these cuts have fallen particularly heavily on the young and on young families; for instance, with the closure of some 30% (about 1,000) of Sure Start centres since 2009<sup>6</sup> and the scrapping of the Education Maintenance Allowance in England in 2010. Young families have been disproportionately affected by the low cap on the annual increase to working-age benefits, and by cuts to tax credits, child benefit and private-sector housing benefit.<sup>7</sup>

It is not as if all generations have been treated equally. While it has been proven statistically that—taken as a whole—the older generation and pensioners are now better off than working-age families (40% of the working-age population earn less than the median pensioner)<sup>8</sup>, benefits for pensioners have been preserved or increased while those for children and other

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance the British Medical Association report, updated December 2018: <https://www.bma.org.uk/collective-voice/policy-and-research/public-and-population-health/child-health/cutting-away-at-our-childrens-future>. Also the “Statement on Visit to the United Kingdom, by Professor Philip Alston, United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights London, 16 November 2018”: [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Poverty/EOM\\_GB\\_16Nov2018.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Poverty/EOM_GB_16Nov2018.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Sutton Trust: “Stop Start” (April 2018); <https://www.suttontrust.com/research-paper/sure-start-childrens-centres-england>

<sup>7</sup> Austerity measures have included a 1% cap in indexation on working-age benefits; £3.9 billion worth of cuts to tax credits; £1.9 billion worth of cuts to Child Benefit; and the £1.8 billion worth of cuts to private sector Housing Benefit.

<sup>8</sup> Office for National Statistics (2017), “What has happened to the income of retired households in the UK over the past 40 years?”; <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/articles/whathashappenedtotheincomeofretiredhouseholdsintheukoverthepast40years/2017-08-08> See also the Social Metrics Commission (2018), “A New Measure of Poverty for the UK”; <http://socialmetricscommission.org.uk/social-metrics-commission-launches-a-new-measure-of-uk-poverty>

young people have declined.<sup>9</sup>

Some services—such as social care for the most vulnerable elderly and the provision of educational places—are statutory obligations for local authorities. Youth services are not, and were among the first to get the chop.<sup>10</sup> That included not just youth clubs or youth centres but also childcare facilities, as well as provision for vulnerable young people, such as drug misuse services and youth offending teams. In 2011-12, funding to youth services in England and Wales fell by 26% and has been falling annually at similar rates ever since—amounting to a 62% cut since 2010/11.<sup>11</sup>

This loss of local authority support has left big gaps, and it is not unreasonable to see a correlation between this and the rise in a whole range of societal problems, particularly in deprived areas, from holiday hunger for school-age children to directionless youth falling into antisocial behaviour, drug use, gangs and knife crime. These are all areas that the establishment—local authorities, the police, national government—have struggled to address. They are also issues which can cause community fracture. And because Big Locals are about grassroots action and neighbourhood-level localism—the ultimate devolution of power—they provide strong case-studies of how communities can step into the gap.

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Ruth Lupton et al (2015), “The Coalition’s Social Policy Record: Policy, Spending and Outcomes 2010–2015”. London School of Economics; <http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/spcc/RRO4.pdf>. See also Adam, S., Browne, J. and Johnson, P. (2012), “Pensioners and the tax and benefit system”. Institute for Fiscal Studies; [https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/bns/BN13\\_Benefits\\_Survey\\_2014.pdf](https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/bns/BN13_Benefits_Survey_2014.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> A good summary of the hierarchy of council services—from critical, regulatory, frontline to other services—and their corresponding vulnerability to cuts, can be found here: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/patrick-butler-cuts-blog/2011/feb/28/council-cuts-what-goes-what-stays>. Note that “Youth Service” appears under the fourth category, “Other services”.

<sup>11</sup> YMCA, “Youth & Consequences: A report examining Local Authority expenditure on youth services in England & Wales” (May 2018); <https://www.ymca.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Youth-Consequences-vo.2.pdf>

It is an interesting and important model. In addressing the symptoms of the breakdown of the intergenerational social contract, grassroots action and localism really seem to work. Big Locals provide a model that could and should inspire some serious rethinking about the delivery of policy and funding.









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# Part One

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## Community fracture

IT WAS THE ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOUR of young people that led to the creation of the Church Hill Big Local area. Wendy and Ian Johnson's concern about this issue in their local town centre drove them to attend a meeting at which, coincidentally, they first heard about the Big Local programme. Wendy is now chair and Ian is head of communications of the Big Local board at Church Hill.

Antisocial behaviour by young people may be the most prominent cause of a community feeling that it is broken. There is a time-honoured tradition of distrust between the elderly and the young, of course—but government-driven cuts since 2010 have played a part in aggravating it. Many of the elderly suffer social isolation, trapped in their homes as public services (and social care provision in particular) retreat, public transport dwindles, local shops and GP surgeries close and the sense of community evaporates. The young, equally affected by a deteriorating economic environment and concomitant

family breakdown, the withdrawal of youth services and few prospects in the locality, drift into antisocial behaviour, or drugs or a violent gang culture, and sometimes all of these together. Rifts between the generations are often built along these fracture lines. A complaint often heard: the elderly are scared to go to the one surviving local shop, for fear of encountering disrespectful (or worse) youths hanging about outside.

This sense of community fracture, or a vulnerability to it, is palpable in all the Big Local areas visited to research this essay: Stoke North, Hackney Wick, the Coastal Community Challenge, and Church Hill.

“The older generation are fearful of the younger generation,” says Linda Hamnett, centre manager at the Whitfield Valley Centre in Stoke North. “But the younger generations are fearful of nothing.” They are having to install a door bell at the centre to monitor who comes in, because of the violent and intimidating behaviour of some young people, and they lock the café door when there’s no staff in there, to keep the knives out of harm’s way. “I think this is sort of indicative of how your mind’s working,” says Linda, “and how you really feel about what’s happening locally.”

It is indicative, too, of the challenges facing Stoke North as a whole. There is a gang culture here, linked to a drug culture.

There is mistrust in both directions. Luke Billingham, a 27-year-old youth worker at Hackney Quest (a youth club in Hackney Wick) says: “A lot of young people are hypersensitive to being viewed as trouble, viewed as problematic, and that can immediately create a bit of an us-and-them dynamic—a bit of tension, where young people walking in the streets feel like it’s them against the world or it’s them against everyone else in the community.”

John Gregory, chair of the Coastal Community Challenge Big Local in Lincolnshire, acknowledges the intergenerational stresses at play, and sympathises with the plight of the young: “You get mistrust between generations because of this austerity and this divide. There is distrust. The youngsters who are in college having to pay £30,000 a year in fees, they say, ‘You, you bloody old buggers, you had it all right, didn’t you?’ There’s a vast difference between them [the generations]. And there is resentment between them.”

Part of this could be put down to a lack of sympathy and understanding on the part of the older generation. John Gregory continues: “It’s the old people who voted to come out of the European Union and they’ve forgotten the youth, because they’re well-off and they’ve got their pensions... Anywhere where there’s a vast amount of retirement, they voted to leave...The kids don’t have a chance any more...The majority of older people don’t realise how lucky they were after 1946.”

Nia Simpson, a 22-year-old graduate now doing an apprenticeship with Hackney Council, testifies to the frustrations of the younger generation: “I feel our generation is being misled. The older generation don’t face the challenges that young people face now. We face challenges that really affect us going forward. There is a massive generation divide between us. The older generation don’t understand these challenges. This has a depressing effect on younger generations—working so hard and not getting anywhere.”

Luke Billingham, at Hackney Quest, fears an impending intergenerational clash: “I think we’re experiencing a level of intergenerational incomprehension which we haven’t seen since the ‘60s, based on fundamentally different economic circumstances between generations. And I think there’s a risk



that there's an intergenerational cold war brewing, similar to what we saw in the '60s, but perhaps more explosive. Young people do not feel understood, listened to, or—in too many cases—cared for.”

Kelsey Howard-Matthews, a 17-year-old A-level student in Hackney, reinforces this sense of disempowerment: “Young people are not heard... Adults speak on behalf of children as if they know what we are thinking. We've lost hope for votes at 16. We're set up with the future that is set up for us—we don't have an opportunity to change it, e.g. university fees at £9,000. This wasn't my decision. Politics is forever breaking trust with young people.”

Public-spending reductions are widely seen as a contributing factor to these circumstances. Broadly speaking, austerity has had a disproportionate effect on deprived communities—not only on welfare provision, social services and social care, but also on employment, public transport, local shops, GP surgeries and access to hospitals. All of the Big Locals areas featured in this paper see themselves as embattled and have given their time and energy to make things better when the system is felt to be letting them down.

Polly Mann, community development and partnership worker at Hackney Wick Big Local, says, “Austerity hit very, very hard in Hackney, and I think people have been creative for a long time. Cuts, cuts, cuts—people have survived cuts for a long time, and we've got to a point now you think services have been cut to the bone. And it's affecting everybody. It's really biting now. There used to be a lot more provision—a lot more youth provision.”

John Monk, who runs the youth club at Sutton on Sea (part of the Coastal Community Challenge Big Local area), holds a similar view: “The loss of youth provision was

dramatically fast. It was the first thing, when austerity set in. What's the easiest thing to go? Youth provision. And it did."

This loss of support has long-term consequences. John Gregory describes how it is for many young people in his community on the Lincolnshire coast: "A lot of the kids I used to know as a youth worker [in Mablethorpe], they're in their thirties now. They've just got nothing—no job, no assets. There's absolutely nothing for them. They can't save. Most of them are in debt: bedroom tax, council tax, the man who comes knocking on the door of everybody for his fifty quid [i.e. the doorstep lenders]. They just can't manage."

Each of the four Big Local areas that features in this essay is quite different, historically, demographically and geographically. And each is using its £1 million grant in its own way, tailored to its particular circumstances and perceived needs and aspirations, according to the priorities identified by the community itself. That, of course, is the beauty of the Big Local programme. Similarly, each has addressed intergenerational fractures in a different way. All have met with a measure of success.

Ian Johnson of Church Hill Big Local says that antisocial behaviour was one of the first issues that they sought to tackle— and is now little more than a memory.









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# Part Two

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## Starting out in life

STOKE-ON-TRENT IS AN UNUSUAL city for many reasons. First of all, it is really a collection of six towns strung out in a conjoined line, from north to south: Tunstall, Burslem, Hanley, Stoke, Longton and Fenton. They were combined into a single city for the first time only in 1910. Secondly, this was the capital of the British pottery industry from the mid-18th century on, home of Wedgwood, Spode, Royal Doulton, Minton, Burleigh and many others. They were sited near collieries which provided coal for the 4,000 brick, bottle kilns across the towns (as well as for their iron and steel industries), and were linked by canal to Liverpool and the world.

Stoke North Big Local brings together three communities (population 7,300) near Tunstall: Chell, Chell Heath and Fegg Hayes—three communities that in the past tended to see themselves as proudly distinct and separate, but the Big Local project has done something to bring them together. They lie virtually in the shadow of the huge Chatterley Whitfield

Colliery, closed in 1977, but still looming with its winding gear and towering chimney stack, while hope remains that it might be turned into an industrial heritage site. For decades, people growing up here had the choice of “pits or pots”: skilled but low-wage employment, underpinned by the traditional reassurances of union support and strong community enterprises, such as working-men’s clubs, and some degree of certainty about employment.

Since 1977 this choice has vanished, along with most of the potteries. Now the biggest employer in Stoke-on-Trent—beside the council and the NHS—is the betting company, Bet365. Nonetheless, the communities of Chell, Chell Heath and Fegg Hayes have remained fairly static. It is a recognised feature of the potteries that people tend to stay put, and don’t have the aspiration or motivation or, often, the skills to move away for training or for work. Young people in Stoke North are reluctant even to go to another of the pottery towns. Three or four generations may live in close proximity to each other, mostly in the three large housing estates built in the 1920s and 1930s. This might sound rather good, on the idealised Italian model, but few see it that way. Deprivation casts a long shadow.

The Stoke North Big Local is associated with a host of community initiatives based at three centres: the Whitfield Valley Centre at Fegg Hayes; The Hub, attached to the Methodist Church but operated by a separate entity called Fegg Hayes Futures; and the Residents’ Centre in Chell Heath. It engages professionals to run its projects—professionals such as Mark Roberts, community development coordinator for Stoke North Big Local, who works for the YMCA; Linda Hamnett, centre manager at the Whitfield Valley Centre, Fegg Hayes; Helen Snashall, community development manager at



The Hub, Fegg Hayes; and Jim Hazleton, youth worker in Fegg Hayes. Jim Gibson is the chair of the Stoke North Big Local and Chell Heath Residents' Association, and volunteers for up to 50 hours a week within the Big Local area for the benefit of the community.

The legacy of the industrial past persists in patterns of community behaviour, and expectations, among the older generation, but there have been two generations since the Chatterley Whitfield colliery closed, and this link is now remote. As Mark Roberts puts it, "Working men's clubs provided the template, really—bowls, tennis, they used to take people on trips. The older generation still want and expect this kind of thing, but the younger generation never experienced it."

Many Stoke North Big Local projects focus on the young. Jim Gibson asserts that there are now more activities for young people than there have ever been—and something virtually every day during the summer holidays.

At the Chell Heath Residents' Association centre, Claire Harris, chair of Families2gether—which was set up by her and other local mums two years ago—runs a Big Local-funded holiday play scheme for up to forty children aged six to 16, and younger if they come with a parent. They do board games and crafts, and paint and bake, while professional sports coaches run groups on the green spaces out front. Crucially, they also offer hot lunches: 54% of school-age children in the area are dependent on school lunches, which makes them vulnerable to holiday hunger.

Time and again, deep regrets are expressed about the cuts made to youth services, of which play schemes used to form part. As Nannette Hulse, the current well-being worker for the Chell Area Family Action Group (CAFAG), recalls: "The



children's centre in Chell Heath had been there for ten years and it had just got to the point where people were beginning to trust you—the hard-to-reach. They would come in and ask for help, where before they wouldn't even cross the door—just when the council said goodbye to a lot of staff.”

The Hub offers many programmes directed at young people, such as cooking lessons called Food and Fun, and music taster sessions with professional music tuition, replacing a service that schools used to provide. The Big Local also sponsors an after-school Youth Media Team film club, for twelve Year-7 children, with a drama instructor and film tutor. They are working on three drama-based projects focusing on antisocial behaviour, what young people want, and old people's isolation.

Sport is encouraged through a link to Port Vale Football Club, which brings professional trainers to the local Monks Neil Park. But Mark Roberts is cautious not to overestimate the role of sport in the Big Local project. “I've got a sports background,” he says (he certainly does: he was an international distance runner in the 1980s and 1990s, and seven times winner of the Potteries Marathon), “but I think the one thing we have to be careful of is that we don't neglect the crafts and the cultural stuff. Not every young person likes sport.”

The Big Local also organises a summer day trip for young people, for example, to Hoo Farm Animal Kingdom, about 30 miles away in Shropshire—where the meerkats made a particularly deep impression. For two-thirds of the children participating, this is their only summer holiday.

But for many young residents of Stoke North, the biggest and most exciting project is the skateboard facility in Monks Neil Park, a £100,000 investment by Big Local, pending final

planning approval—as clear a sign as possible that young people are central to their programme. Big Local chair and youth worker Jim Gibson remembers that when a temporary skateboard park was built here as a trial, a boy on a skateboard stopped to tell him, “This is the only time an adult has asked what we wanted and done it.” The usual experience in the community is to be asked what they want by the authorities, sometimes exhaustively, only to be ignored—creating widespread disenchantment with, and loss of faith in, top-down local government.

Clearly, the Stoke North Big Local is filling a gap with services that are desperately needed, especially for early years provision. As Mark Roberts puts it, what youth initiatives are doing in Stoke North is “picking up from the cuts over the last six years, even the children’s centres.” But there is more to this than that: they have identified local needs and carefully pinpointed how they can be addressed and tailored the funding accordingly. This is responsiveness at a neighbourhood level.

Church Hill Big Local has likewise invested time and money in early years provision. One of their biggest infrastructure projects is the creation of a fully-equipped children’s play park at the Willow Tree Community Centre—the product of five years’ planning and negotiation. They have also funded the expansion of the Squirrels Nursery at the same site, so that it can accommodate twice as many children (up to 32) to cater for the expansion of the government’s free childcare programme (30 hours a week for children aged three and four). Both of these initiatives would, in the past, have probably been considered the responsibility of the local authority—a point not lost on local residents. But with Big Local funding, and careful consultation, Church Hill could just get on and do it.







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# Part Three

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## The precarious generation

HACKNEY WICK HAS ALWAYS BEEN the poorest part of the East London Borough of Hackney. Physically, this is a very mixed area. There are streets of Victorian and Edwardian houses, recently gentrified, and open green spaces lined with mature trees, such as Mabley Green and Well Street Common, with the extensive Victoria Park at the southern border. But along the centreline on the west side run the massive Gascoyne estates, built in two phases in the 1940s and 1960s-70s. The smaller eastern side is all but cut off from the west by the raised A12 dual carriageway leading out of London to the M11, into which traffic threads from the main arteries of the borough. This eastern part, running up to the Lee Navigation (a canalised river) was a maze of workshops and small industrial units, many of which in recent times were taken over as artists' studios, and there's still a lively arts scene here. But the studios and workshops are rapidly being closed down and their sites redeveloped as high-end apartments.



It is a desirable area, with the impressively revamped Hackney Wick Overground station providing good transport links into central London. On the other side of the Navigation is the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park (site of the 2012 Olympic Games), also fast being redeveloped, not only with apartments but also a host of high-status cultural entities centring on neighbouring Stratford, such as the new V&A East Museum, the London School of Fashion, BBC Music, Sadler's Wells, and the University College London East campus. A portion of the Olympic Park is included in the Big Local area.

This vibrant activity on the doorstep might be expected to give a lift to the deprived neighbourhood of Hackney Wick, but little has been done, apparently, to bring it into the story. Instead, many residents feel cut out of these developments and continue to feel neglected, the victims of austerity and cuts. Food poverty is a serious problem, as is holiday hunger for school children otherwise dependent on school meals. Much of the distress comes from in-work poverty: people in work—perhaps on zero-hour contracts—who simply can't make ends meet. The food banks are busy; there are night shelters and soup kitchens for the destitute.

On the estates, knife crime and the gang culture are major concerns—and particularly among young people: there were several knife-crime deaths in Hackney in 2018.

The Hackney Wick Big Local area (which goes under the name of the Wick Award) has the same boundaries as the local electoral ward of the same name, and a population of about 12,000. It has placed young people at the forefront of its programme. (The demographics are reason enough for this: over a third of the residents are 25 or under, and nearly half are under 30.) To this end, the Wick Award Big Local Partnership commissioned a survey, organised and conducted

by young people, of young people's attitudes, involving over 400 participants aged between eight and 20. The result was the report called Hackney Wick Through Young Eyes,<sup>12</sup> which paints a vivid picture of their hopes, aspirations and fears. In the main findings listed in the abridged version of the report, we read that, "Young people face significant problems and challenges in Hackney Wick: they cite issues such as not enough to do; poverty and poor housing; lack of work opportunities for older young people; being negatively stereotyped as trouble-makers or as 'bad'." But, "Prime among them [the problems and challenges] are issues with crime, violence, and gangs. Gangs were almost ubiquitous in discussions with young people of all ages, and clearly cause substantial fear and anxiety."

The report adds: "There also needs to be recognition that the causes of gang involvement are complex ('there are so many levels to young people') and cannot be separated from other issues raised in this research: deprivation, lack of work opportunities, lack of enough to do, school exclusions and declining affordability, for instance, all play a part."<sup>13</sup>

Hackney Wick Through Young Eyes was generated by Hackney Quest, a youth club which, in 2018, was "celebrating 30 years of helping create a community in which all young people and families have the opportunity to realise their full potential." It has some 250 young people aged eight to 18 at any one time on its books, and a much broader community of people who have been involved with the centre over the years, now including three generations of some families. It provides

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<sup>12</sup> "Hackney Wick Through Young Eyes" (January 2018). Abridged version: [http://www.hackneyquest.org.uk/images/HWTYE\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.hackneyquest.org.uk/images/HWTYE_Summary.pdf). Full version: <http://www.hackneyquest.org.uk/images/HWTYE.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Abridged version, section 4.



a huge range of activities and services, including sports, music production, daily holiday programmes, a homework club, camping trips, mentoring, volunteering, classes in CV writing, coffee mornings and a weekly, free community meal.

Hackney is one of several London boroughs where knife crime has hit the headlines in recent months, readily associated by the press with gang culture. Luke Billingham, a youth worker at Hackney Quest, sees this as a symptom of a wider problem, where fractures in society under stress leave young people with a need for status, for a sense that they are valued, recognised and respected—that they matter. In some cases, young people can seek this fulfilment through “risky, status-seeking activities”.

Luke paints a wider picture of a new and worrying fragility in young people’s outlook: “A lot of young people feel that their mental health struggles—or their mental state—just isn’t understood by older people, and I think part of that is the economics of it. A lot of young people that I talk to, even if they are quite young, in their younger teens, are completely shit-scared about their future. Obviously, everyone experiences a sense of vertigo when they leave home—like where am I going to live, where am I going to get a job, what’s going to happen to me? But now I’m coming across people as young as fourteen deeply worrying about their future, thinking, ‘I might crack when I leave home’... When it comes to mental health, too many people are chatting about like it’s all social media and it’s all because of smartphones—and I’m not saying that’s not involved at all. But I am saying that basic life security is like the ground beneath your feet. So housing, jobs, financial security—that’s like the life fundamentals that affect everyone consciously or otherwise; that’s the stuff that truly makes you feel you’re on firm ground or you’re not.

And if you've got insecurity underneath your feet and you're looking at crap on your phone which is really troubling and you've got relationship issues, all that combines to create quite fundamental levels of insecurity in your life."

Hackney Quest provides vital support to combat this insecurity "with a non-judgemental, unconditional, positive regard for young people", as Luke puts it, to set them on their feet as they head towards a precarious adult world. To some extent it replaces the duty of care of schools, where ever lower teacher-to-student ratios and increasing curriculum pressures have led to a reduction in the "warmth of human relationships"—seen in increasing exclusions, where Hackney Quest often has to step in. "They come here and they get a warm welcome, everyone knows their name, everyone cares about them... We're there as this other place that they can go to and where they know that they matter and hopefully we matter to them, they matter to us and that's what weaves you into a community—a feeling that you matter to it and it matters to you."

There can be little doubt that Hackney Quest provides a crucial service—crucial to individuals and crucial to the neighbourhood as a whole. Funding cuts would have wide repercussions—but Hackney Quest, it should be noted, is one of a handful of youth centres supported by Hackney Borough Council which, against the trend, has maintained this area of youth provision.

The example of Hackney Quest makes it easy to see why all four of the Big Local areas that feature in this essay have set considerable store by their youth clubs as agents of change. Youth clubs are relatively expensive to run (they need professional youth workers, and a space in which to operate) and, once lost, are very difficult to reconstitute: it takes years



to build up the necessary trust between the youth workers and those who might want to attend. The newly revived youth club at the Whitfield Valley Centre, Fegg Hayes, Stoke North is a case in point.

Run by experienced youth worker Jim Hazleton and two assistants, it operates on Tuesdays at the Whitfield Valley Centre. Local young people, aged around 15, drop by to play snooker, table tennis and video games and watch TV, and go to the local school for football sessions. It took a while building up trust, after a rocky opening session which was followed by some vandalism of public property. Linda Hamnett, the centre manager, immediately confronted the culprits: “Don’t come back,’ I told them, ‘Youth club’s cancelled’... The amazing thing was, about a couple of days later, a group of about six of them came and apologised. And so we carried on. And after that we got more respect.”

Now the youth club members trust staff sufficiently to bring their problems to them. They get help, too, with practice GCSE papers and job interviews. Jim Gibson sees the bigger picture of community engagement: “Big Local money really makes a difference. It helps people, builds confidence, provides volunteering opportunities—and they can go from volunteering to full-time jobs, which benefits all the family and gives them a sense of pride, starting somewhere to better themselves.”

Likewise, the YMCA youth club at Church Hill is relatively new. Run by Lewis Frampton, a trained youth worker in his early twenties, it opens three days a week at the Willow Tree Community Hall, catering for young people aged from eight to 15 and 16, who can gather to play table football, pool, PlayStation games and so on. As an inducement to keep them coming, a trip to Drayton Manor Theme Park is free if they

attend the club twice a week during the summer months. “Stops them hanging around on the streets causing trouble,” is Lewis’s blunt appraisal. Such behaviour previously caused friction between older people and young people in the community. Asked whether this was still a problem, Lewis—in between flinging himself energetically around a goal in a beat-the-goalie game for kids at the Big Local Summer Fayre—said: “No, not really.” People in Church Hill put this down to what the youth club has achieved.

By contrast, Sutton on Sea, part of the Coastal Community Challenge Big Local, has the “longest-running youth club in the UK”. Led by John Monk, MBE—who founded it (when aged just 17) in 1965 in the Meridale Hall, the old lifeboat station, which is still its home—it is a remarkable and enduring institution, as acknowledged by its winning the Queen’s Award for Voluntary Service in 2004. It has played a vital role in the lives of many local young people over the years. There used to be another youth club in neighbouring Mablethorpe, but that closed about ten years ago. Latterly, however, John has seen the numbers drop for a variety of reasons: the competition with online engagement and smartphone technology, for one thing, but also a more unstable population since 2009, due to council re-housing policies, and the closure of the local secondary school, which means that students are now dispersed to other towns for education, with the bus time that this entails. But there is no question in John’s mind about the life-changing potential of youth provision, which can often be the only trusted adult supervision and mentoring where family and school are failing to fulfil those roles.

Youth clubs these days face new challenges, as John Gregory, chair of the Coastal Community Challenge Big Local,

who was himself a youth worker in Mablethorpe, explains: “Youngsters of today want more than what youngsters of yesteryear wanted. They want technology. They don’t want to go there and sit around drinking coffee. They want to be able to get onto the internet. They want to do research. And technology costs money. And you’ve got to pay the youth workers. Austerity has cut all that... There’s absolutely no funding whatsoever.” Except, it seems, Big Local funding.

The youth work of the Big Local areas is by no means confined to youth clubs. At Church Hill, board member Graham Penny is the Group Scout Leader at Marlfield Barn, home to Church Hill scouts for over 40 years and recently renovated with Big Local support. It brings together a contingent of 50–60 Beavers, Cubs and Scouts. The Barn will also host a cinema club, with assistance from the national scheme called Cinema For All, showing films for all the family during school holidays.

At Hackney Wick Big Local, the Partnership Panel looks at community projects deemed valid or which have a track record and supports them with grants of up to £1000 from the Wick Award Community Chest Fund. One of these, which has already been shown to have a remarkable and galvanising effect on young people—and in combating the gang culture—is the Hackney Wick Football Club, run by reformed ex-gang member and prisoner Robert (Bobby) Kasanga.<sup>14</sup>

Church Hill Big Local sponsors a Mentoring for Girls scheme that works with girls who have been identified at school as needing extra help—vulnerable to bullying and low self-confidence, and potentially at high risk of becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training). Two of its

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<sup>14</sup> See his own account: <https://dalstons.com/journal/2018/6/4/community-focus-bobby-kasanga>

graduates demonstrated the value of the scheme by making a presentation to the Big Local board—something they say they would never have had the courage to do without it.

Wendy Johnson, chair of the Church Hill Big Local partnership, says, “It costs a lot of money but I think it makes a big difference. Well, it’s something you never really know the result of.” Indeed, precisely because quantifying long-term results of youth work is difficult, this makes it vulnerable to government funding cuts. But local people can make this kind of assessment, and can see the difference, and can sensitively direct funding where they feel it is most needed.









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# Part Four

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## Transitions to adult life

THE COASTAL COMMUNITY CHALLENGE (CCC) Big Local area covers the three small towns of Mablethorpe, Trusthorpe and Sutton on Sea on the Lincolnshire coast, linked by a two-mile-long promenade that fronts a broad stretch of sand on the North Sea—glorious on the warm days of summer. They are still popular summer resorts, offering the traditional seaside pleasures of sandcastles, sunbathing in the shelter of windbreaks, swimming overseen by beach lifeguards, pony-rides, a sand train running along the beach, a big, public paddling pool, amusement arcades and funfair rides, crazy golf, fish and chips, and candyfloss—plus a sea-front skateboard park joint-funded by the Big Local and other benefactors. But the summer season lasts for just eight weeks. There are about 13,000 residents in the three towns, and 33,000 in summer. Many of the visitors are accommodated in the extensive caravan parks along this coast.

Employment is equally seasonal. For the rest of the year, there is very little to do. Mablethorpe now ranks among the most deprived communities in the UK—although, deceptively, the towns have quite a bit of good-quality private housing, much of it occupied by retirees. The towns received their first major setback in 1970, when the Beeching cuts put paid to their railway connection. At first, their isolation was mitigated by a bus service; post-2008, this remains adequate in the summer but very limited in winter, which places a great strain on anyone in the community without a car. The nearest job centres are in Louth (16 miles), Skegness (18 miles), Boston (28 miles) and Grimsby (30 miles); the nearest hospital is at Louth, or, for accident and emergency services at night, at Boston, Grimsby or Lincoln (43 miles). These are also more or less the only places where work might be found.

The only secondary school here, Tennyson High School in Mablethorpe, was closed in 2016, in the face of much local opposition. “It was another attack,” says John Monk, who runs the youth club at Sutton on Sea. “It was demoralising. But physically it has an impact on the town itself. We’ve always had a secondary school.” The school now sits empty, a shabby ruin reminding everyone what an important community hub this was before the days that school-age students had to be bussed out to the surrounding towns.

Because this is a seaside resort, with a lot of spare B&Bs and temporary accommodation off-season, it is now a place where the local authorities house a disproportionate number of homeless families. There is a high turnover of these incomers, who may last here only a year or two before moving on, creating further instability, especially in the primary schools. There is relatively little council-house provision—and little aspiration among young people to buy a house, as

there is so little permanent employment. The area has a high number of people who are registered disabled, and high levels of childhood obesity and early-onset diabetes. There is a lot of drug-dealing, which sometimes erupts into violence. Some of the problems are peculiar to coastal resorts, such as the homelessness suffered by seasonal workers coming here in the summer season, who then run out of money and end up sleeping rough.

Some 65% of the resident population is retired, many of them incomers who were attracted to the coast as holiday-makers. They can find themselves trapped here when their mobility declines, unable to get to hospitals or get home from them, and increasingly dependent on the diminishing social care services.

Young people brought up on this part of the coast are forced to look elsewhere for training and employment, and tend then to settle away, unable to support their ageing parents to the degree they might have done if they had been able to remain in the locality.

If generations are moving apart, this is actually part of a national trend.<sup>15</sup> Britain generally is becoming intergenerationally less cohesive, because the generations are moving away from each other, clustering separately and mixing less. This has a multitude of consequences, including economic and social ones. This age segregation also results in a lack of understanding of the pressures that different generations face—another source of fracture in civil society.

John Gregory, chair of the Coastal Community Challenge Big Local, sees this clearly: “The younger generation has got

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<sup>15</sup> David Kingman (2016): “Generations Apart: The growth of age segregation in England and Wales”, Intergenerational Foundation; <http://www.if.org.uk/research-posts/generations-apart-the-growth-of-age-segregation-in-england-and-wales>

a bum deal. There's no work for them, so they've got to leave home. Their mums and dads are an ageing population... Mum and dad get ill, there's nobody to look after them because the young have got their own families now, they've moved away... and have got jobs. So dad or mum has to sell the house to pay for care. So the kids aren't getting their inheritance. The money gets used up very quickly, with £1500 per week in some of these care homes."

There is relatively little council-house provision in the towns of the Coastal Community Challenge, and the housing market is dominated by incoming retirees. Young people aren't interested, as John Gregory points out: "Why would you buy a house in a town where you can't get a job? You wouldn't get a mortgage, would you? To get a good job you have to travel." And the young do travel: they up sticks and leave.

There are similar problems in Hackney Wick, an inner-city area of East London: same outcome, but different scenario. Here there simply isn't enough social housing to go around. Young people, often from families that have lived for generations in Hackney Wick, are forced to move elsewhere, with all the dislocation in family relationships—and loss of potential mutual assistance between generations—that this implies. As Polly Mann, community development and partnership worker at the Hackney Wick Big Local, says: "People in social housing traditionally would hope to stay where your family roots were, but there's no chance that the new generation of people who grew up here can stay, because there's not enough."

Housing featured strongly among the concerns registered in the Big-Local-sponsored survey called "Hackney Wick Through Young Eyes": "Young people as young as eight quite commonly complained about their housing situation—about





the quality of their housing block, the size of their flat, damp or other problems. Local young people's quality of life and wellbeing is being undermined by housing issues. They spoke about the price of rent, and some commented that neighbours or friends are having to move because of this. Both the condition and affordability of housing can have a real impact on young people.”<sup>16</sup>

University may once have been a route out of poverty to a better, more secure and rewarding life—an engine of social mobility. Now, with the advent of the current loans scheme, the jury is out. Even if school leavers can achieve the necessary grades—and academic achievement in these deprived areas is often alarmingly low—there is a strong aversion to the risk of debt.

Paul Scott, a former director of the Grimsby & Cleethorpes Enterprise Agency, who offers advice at the InfoCentre at the Sutton on Sea youth club, says, “If you can imagine a young person here in this area with parents—perhaps even being supported by a lone parent, but even with two parents who are on seasonal work, whose income is very low, who are just managing to keep their heads above the water, who can't afford extra-curriculum activities and things like that, which will help children to progress—you can't imagine that person saying, ‘I'll go to university and incur a £50,000 debt.’ Well, if you did [hear that], it would be very rare.”

It is not hard to argue that the imposition of tuition fees, now at £9,250 a year, is one of the most egregious acts of intergenerational injustice committed by the current

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<sup>16</sup> Hackney Wick Through Young Eyes” (January 2018), abridged version, section 7.  
[http://www.hackneyquest.org.uk/images/HWTYE\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.hackneyquest.org.uk/images/HWTYE_Summary.pdf)



government. Now that maintenance grants have been converted into extended maintenance loans, young people from poorer backgrounds can end up in even greater debt (£57,000 or more) than their more well-off peers. This route out of deprivation has been—if not fenced off—at least strewn with barbed wire.

Not everyone is put off, and some proudly head off to their university full of youthful hope—only to be disappointed. This is a feeling echoed widely across the Big Locals. Polly Mann, at Hackney Wick, has witnessed it: “There’s an aspiration to go to university whatever it costs, but then you can end up with a daft degree and a lot of debt and no job—and disillusion... People end up in debt for not a lot, and then lose their confidence.”

Luke Billingham, youth worker at Hackney Quest, notes: “There’s a direct correlation or direct proportionality between how poor you are and how likely you are to drop out [of university]. A lot of young people are being encouraged by their school or their parents, or both, to think that university is their only option, and end up going to university and then dropping out with awful consequences for them, financially, psychologically and emotionally.”

Parents are sometimes so university-obsessed, he says, that apprenticeships are seen as second-class options. Recent graduate Nia Simpson, now a communications apprentice at Hackney Council, is only too aware of why it is a mistake to see the choice this way: “Even though I got a lot from university, the apprenticeship is what has helped me get into the field I want to be in. To an extent I regret going to university. The financial burden and the distress of the third year to meet deadlines etcetera is very disheartening. With an apprenticeship you are learning and working and not getting

into debt. I would have been £47,000 better off at the age of 21 or 22.”

For some young people, university is not an option at all, and apprenticeships can be hard to come by. That leaves the job market, but employment prospects in deprived areas are dismal. About 22% of working-age people in Stoke North, for instance, claim workless benefits, compared to 12.7% for the West Midlands as a whole. Here there is a problem of motivation, and a localised mentality which is reinforced by poor local transport. Helen Snashall, community development manager at The Hub, sees this as a legacy of the “pits or pots” days of the past: “It is almost worse now in some cases because of unemployment, and unemployment is what they come out of school expecting to do. You have two, three generations of a family where unemployment is the issue, and some of it is that they don’t see the opportunities, particularly because of the localised nature of the community in Stoke-on-Trent... Sometimes the perception is, ‘Why bother with a good education, because there are no decent jobs for me at the end of it’, so they don’t have that aspiration—and that is certainly a part of our vision, to try to give youngsters opportunities both here but also to go to other places.” At the Hub, they do this, for example, by organising trips to the Birmingham Literary Festival and to Thinktank, the Birmingham science museum.

In these key transitions to adult life—university, employment, housing—there is not always a lot that Big Local areas can do. But they can provide mentoring and information. John Monk, the founder of the youth club at Sutton on Sea, has a panoramic vision of intergenerational issues, and sees age in the community as a continuum. To this end, the InfoCentre at the youth club brings together local councillors and various professional advisers; held every Friday, it is open to anyone

who wants to drop by. Here Paul Scott offers advice on setting up as an entrepreneur (all ages considered), and operates an innovative Crisis Loan Fund, a Big-Local-funded, low-interest scheme to help out those who might otherwise be forced to accept the terms of a doorstep lender. The East Lindsey Advice Project (ELAP), run by Andy Silvester and Amanda Wain, provides the broad range of help and advice that in the past was offered by Citizens Advice: help with universal credit, advice on wills, power of attorney, job applications, apprenticeships and so on. In its first year of being engaged by Big Local, ELAP saw 1,200 people.

Local information, local knowledge, local experience, local expertise: these are all ways of binding and building a community and making sure everyone, whatever their age, feels they have a place in it, a stake in it—that they matter. This is particularly important, above all, for the young, as they set forth into adult life.



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# Part Five

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## Young and old together

THE WEST MIDLANDS TOWN OF REDDITCH, in Worcestershire, has a long—and perhaps surprising—history as the world capital of the needle industry. This reached its zenith in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with the manufacture of sewing needles, sewing-machine needles, surgical needles and gramophone needles. Despite the seeming simplicity of the product, needle-making was a complex process involving some thirty different processes, and Redditch managed to corner the market. It also attracted other industries, such as Royal Enfield motorcycles.

As with so many industrial centres, Redditch's industries declined in the 20th century, and it is now more famous for its massive Kingfisher Shopping Centre, one of the largest in the UK. Church Hill, about three miles east of Redditch town centre, was one of a handful of new-town residential areas, purpose-built in the 1970s to provide accommodation for local workers, particularly at the Longbridge plant in Birmingham,

seven miles to the north, formerly home to Austin and Rover (all car production finally ceased here in 2016). Church Hill is now home to about 8,100 residents, living mainly in two-storey terraced houses arranged in spacious groups called Closes, set around communal green spaces, and with access roads lined with trees. Driving through, you are barely aware of any housing at all. Surrounded by wooded countryside, it looks almost idyllic—except that Church Hill South contains pockets of some of the highest levels of deprivation in the country (the Big Local area also includes neighbouring Church Hill North, which is more prosperous).

Isolation is part of the problem—a sense of remoteness reinforced by the woodland landscape. There is—and always has been—a bus service running on a dedicated bus route through the centre, but because buses primarily serve places along the routes to Redditch, Worcester and Birmingham, with limited evening and weekend services, most residents rely on their own cars, and the streets are full of them. The centre, recently rebuilt in a new location a short distance from where it originally stood, consists of a small supermarket, a medical centre, a pharmacy, hairdressers and two takeaways—modest, but adequate for essential needs. For anything more, residents have to travel further afield. There is a fair number of modern enterprises in the locality, including a new high-tech development called Eastern Gateway at Moons Moat on Church Hill South's doorstep, but these call for specialist skills, and Redditch, with a record of low educational attainment, finds it difficult to supply the workforce needed. Residents of Church Hill seeking work, therefore, usually have to look elsewhere, which helps to explain why figures for workless benefit claimants in Church Hill have been a



percentage point higher than the West Midlands average.<sup>17</sup> Much of the housing is owned by the council, and there is fair bit of private renting, resulting from council house sales. There are above-average numbers of lone-parent families here. Debt is a big problem, and the Big Local pays for debt advice delivered by a Worcester-based organisation called Signs of Hope: debt is often seen in the context of struggling lone parents.

The Church Hill Big Local is run by a board of twelve local residents. It provides funding for community groups and initiatives as well as some physical infrastructure projects, such as the renovation of an underused, undermanaged public park at Bomford Hill, in Church Hill North, to install a new war memorial to commemorate the centenary of the 1918 Armistice.

Although Church Hill Big Local has carried out a number of projects specifically for young people (such as its play park and youth club), it does not exhibit a bias towards any particular age. It does whatever it thinks can work sustainably, and these are often intergenerational initiatives. It is candid about projects that it tried but which failed to take off, such as Walking Football. Walking Netball, by contrast, played by all ages (currently seven to 63) and genders has been successful. Tai Chi classes are similarly open to all. This conforms to its Big Local objectives: the partnership has divided its responsibilities into four groups, one of which is communities. In its plan, it writes: “A large aspect of what this group looks to provide is activities for all ages and where possible, activities that encourage and maximise social inclusion and intergenerational opportunities.”

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<sup>17</sup> Age 16–24 5.2% (West Midlands 4.1%); working age (16–64) 13.9% (West Midlands 12.7%). Source: Local Insight profile for Church Hill, OCSI 2016.

This certainly applies to one of its most successful community groups, Krafty Sew & Sews, which has an age-span of “nine months to 87”. They do embroidery, knitting and all kinds of craftwork, and also organise coach trips (subsidised by Big Local), for instance, to the Birmingham NEC’s Creative Craft Show at Christmas. The formula may be simple, but Krafty Sew & Sews has proved a life-saver for participants who had otherwise been vulnerable to the risks of social isolation. It is now largely self-funding.

The Green Spaces project, run by landscape gardener Stephen Betteridge, likewise involves all ages, developing allotments for the benefit of the community, and producing plants (including fruit and vegetable plants) for public spaces, notably around the Church Hill Centre. One allotment is set aside as the “learning part” for school gardening clubs. Produce is given to cooking courses at the Willow Tree Centre, teaching young people not only how to grow food but also how to use raw ingredients. A hairdressing salon in Church Hill Centre, run by Zoe Gardner, offers free basic training to local people aged eight to 60-plus, two hours a week for a six-week course.

This is the experience at Hackney Wick. For example, the community hall of the low-density, low-rise Trowbridge Estate, built with older residents in mind, hosts a silver surfers group which invites tech-savvy young people to come in to help older generations with digital technology. The Gascoyne Over 50s club has drop-in sessions and craft workshops, and also runs trips specially designed for old people accompanied by grandchildren, for instance, to Paradise Wildlife Park just north of London.

Bingo at the Chell Heath Residents’ Association centre in Stoke North is for all ages (five to 85); members of the youth

club have been encouraged to interact with the luncheon club at the Whitfield Valley Centre, which caters for the over 55s. The residents' association afternoon teas, run by Pamela Heraty at The Hub and funded by Big Local, caters for parents and children and all ages. "Older people like younger people running around," says Pamela. The Chell Area Family Action Group (CAFAG) has a job club that can help with CVs, interview preparation, work placement and volunteering opportunities (which can open the door to permanent work); there is no age bias. And then there are the dance troupes, a West Midlands working-class tradition, involving all ages from toddlers to adults, here assisted by Big Local funds for their glamorous costumes and coach trips to competitions—and without which such things would be beyond their means. "Majorettes without batons", is how Helen Snashall, community development manager at The Hub, describes them, "and with human pyramids. One of our biggest intergenerational successes."

Annual fairs and festivals likewise bring the entire community together. Church Hill has two annual events: the Christmas Fayre and the Summer Fayre, with attractions for young children such as a bouncy castle, bumper cars, an inflatable slide and spinning cups, all subsidised by Big Local. The Coastal Community Challenge had its first Big Local Christmas Extravanza in 2017, filling the main streets of Mablethorpe with an ice-skating rink, jugglers, Christmas markets and much else. Stoke North has a lantern parade in March (whole families come to make lanterns out of willow and tissue paper at workshops held in the community centres), as well as two summer fairs, the Chell Heath Carnival and the Fegg Hayes Village Fête, attended by 900 and 500 people respectively.

Intergenerational practice, bringing old and young together and all in between, can certainly provide a salve to intergenerational fracture. Above all, it brings the young into the community, and demonstrates that the community has their interests at heart.

This is something that government policy would find hard to orchestrate. Local communities are best placed to decide what is needed, and where best to invest their time and energies, and their funds—if they are lucky enough to have any. Money is not everything, of course, but the Big Local programme is clear evidence that—when distributed to people on the ground who know where to direct it—it is a very effective catalyst, even in relatively small amounts.







LINCOLNSHIRE

MBD  
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## CONCLUSION

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ACROSS BRITAIN, ACROSS EUROPE, across the world, there are deep, structural problems in society that offend against the ideals of intergenerational justice. The lives of young people have been, and are being, blighted by the inability or unwillingness of older generations to honour the intergenerational social contract. For whatever reasons—over-optimism, short-sightedness, blinkers, ignorance, greed—the older generations have allowed policy-makers to feather their nests while neglecting their obligations towards the young and future generations. This can be seen in housing, employment, welfare benefits, pensions, childcare, higher education, environmental degradation, even transport policy and health provision.

What can be done about it? Government seems incapable of rectifying the broader miscarriages of intergenerational justice or is always slow to move. Austerity has not helped. But mitigating solutions can be found at a community level.

As we have seen, when communities are given the opportunity to prioritise use of funds—as is the case in Big Local areas— you can find compelling examples of them choosing to contribute significantly to the process of

redressing the intergenerational deficit. Holiday clubs for school children, youth clubs, organised sports, mentoring schemes, advice services—all these have come to the rescue to fill the gaps left by funding cuts and short-term policy-making. They are an essential part of Local Trust's project to "build communities".

Neighbourhood-level, bottom-up decision-making can be applied broadly to the whole community, as well as on the micro-level of the individual. If it helps individuals, the whole community can benefit. Ian Johnson, in charge of communications for the Church Hill Big Local partnership, tells this story: "The police described it to us that instead of the individuals—because it's boys and girls now—falling through the crack in the system and then becoming a problem to the police, catching them at a younger age and supporting them and trying to solve some of their issues and problems, there and then, works... If Big Local hadn't done the work with him—I can't mention any names—we would have expected him to be one of their [the police's] regular customers, because it was going that way and it's turned around. And that—just as a part of Big Local—that makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand up, when somebody tells you that. You have made that much difference."

One million pounds sounds like a big amount of money at first glance, especially in a deprived community, but then—spread over ten, and now fifteen, years—one million pounds does not sound so much after all. Local Trust's total hand-out of £165 million pounds to 150 communities sounds an enormous amount of money, but set against a total government annual budget of more than £800 billion it too begins to look like a minnow.

Nonetheless, with these at-once generous, at-once modest means at its disposal the Big Local programme is making a huge, palpable difference to the communities. Young people in particular benefit.

Youth provision, social care and welfare in general are, of course, properly the responsibility of local and national government. There is no suggestion that they should renege on or defer their responsibilities in these areas. But they could review the effectiveness of their delivery and study the Big Local model. Third-sector organisations looking for the best way to apply their funds might do the same.

If approaches based on putting control of resources in the hands of local communities could be rolled out across the whole nation, just think of the benefits it could bring to our young today and, in the long term, to those generations “who are to be born”. And if communities prioritise allocation of resources to intergenerational fairness, why can’t central and local government?

"I think there's a risk that there's an intergenerational cold war brewing, similar to what we saw in the 1960s, but perhaps more explosive. Young people do not feel understood, listened to, or—in too many cases—cared for." Luke, Hackney Wick

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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 'perhaps the most important and ambitious experiment in community development ever undertaken in the UK'.

Antony Mason considers how four Big Local areas – Wick Award, Church Hill, Stoke North and Coastal Community Challenge – are each choosing to prioritise the welfare of young people. Mason recognises the life-changing potential of youth provision and suggests the Big Local approach to filling this gap in services could inspire a national re-think on youth policy and funding.

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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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