



**Local Trust**  
trusting  
local  
people

# Power in our hands:

An inquiry into positive  
and lasting change in  
the Big Local programme

# Local Trust

## About this report

This paper is part of a series addressing three lines of inquiry which test the hypothesis of the Big Local programme. Together they explore place-based funding, resident-led decision making and action, and positive and lasting change.

This paper was written by Lindsay Street. July 2020.

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Cover photo: The parade at Whitley Bay Carnival  
Photo credit: Paul Norris



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# Introduction

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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 to be spent over 10 to 15 years. 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.

The programme was designed to not only fund community projects of choice, but to build capacity, and create lasting change. To understand the extent to which the programme has achieved these aims, Local Trust developed an ambitious Research and Evaluation Action Plan (Local Trust, 2019a) which outlines a hypothesis about what the Big Local programme will achieve.

The **hypothesis of the Big Local programme** is:

Long term funding and support to build capacity gives residents in hyper-local areas agency to take decisions and to act to create positive and lasting change.

Due to the nature of the Big Local programme, especially working with 150 communities and for a such a long period of time, defining one research project that will test every aspect of our hypothesis would be impossible. Instead, we have identified **three lines of inquiry** which are inter-related but focus on testing different parts of the hypothesis. They explore: place-based funding, resident-led decision making and action, and positive and lasting change.

The three-part Power in our hands series brings together research conducted over the period of the action plan, along with other relevant research, to understand our current learning as it relates to the lines of inquiry. We do not assume that Local Trust has fully answered the questions of each line of inquiry, rather, we seek to understand what our current learning is across the programme in order to share with Big Local areas, funders and policymakers. This series also identifies future research and learning which could be included in Local Trust's next research and evaluation action plan.

This paper explores the **positive and lasting change** inquiry and seeks to answer the following questions:

- What is appropriate and proportionate change for a programme of this kind?
- How can change be measured while minimising the administrative burden on communities?

As a precursor to the first question, we also ask:

- What are Big Local partnerships identifying as changes they want to achieve in their areas?



The community herb garden in My Clubmoor Big Local, Liverpool, where local residents can get involved in planting herbs and other edible produce.

## Methodology

Members of the research team identified research from the 2018-2020 period that appeared to answer a particular line of inquiry. We then reviewed all such research and summarised the different findings and emerging response under each inquiry. We held a workshop in February 2020 to present what we had initially found to the wider research team and were given suggestions for further data and reports to review. The workshop also identified emerging gaps which were used to shape questions in our next action plan. The team overseeing the review went on to review the remaining sources and produce three summary papers for each line of inquiry.

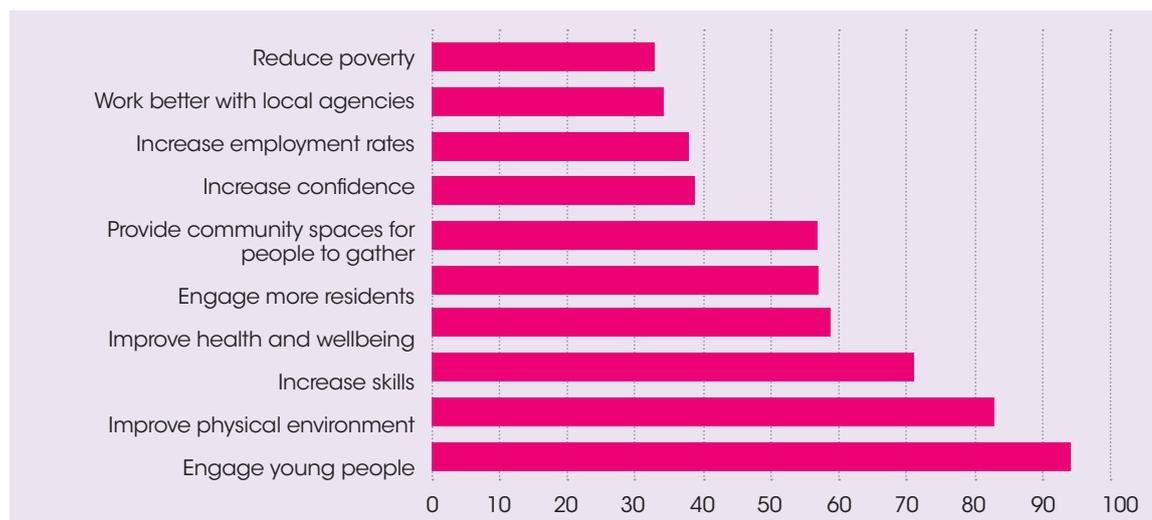
# What are Big Local partnerships identifying as changes they want to achieve in their areas?

This additional question is included to capture the changes partnerships want to achieve in their communities and inform the other questions as part of this line of inquiry. The Big Local programme gives decision-making power to partnerships<sup>1</sup> so they can identify changes that are needed in their area, based on community consultations, their own local knowledge and other data they have about their area.

Recently, Local Trust analysed plan reviews<sup>2</sup> to categorise the different changes areas wanted to achieve through their Big Local work (the plan review process is discussed more below). The graph below outlines the ten most frequently mentioned changes that areas want to achieve. While this

should not be taken as a complete list of changes that areas want to achieve, it does provide an indication of what is most important across the programme and where there is most need to improve aspects of their local community.

## Changes that Big Local areas want to achieve, as identified in plan reviews (2020)



<sup>1</sup> **Big Local partnerships** are groups of at least eight people, the majority of whom must be residents, who guide the overall direction of Big Local in the Big Local area:

<sup>2</sup> **Plan reviews** must be submitted at least once per grant agreement. They ask partnerships to assess their Big Local plan about what they learned and the impact they made. Each Big Local partnership can decide how they want to complete the review and the types of data they include in it.



A volunteer mentors local school children at the weekly homework club in Well Street kitchen cafe in Hackney, London.

While the graph presents the changes that Big Local partnerships intend to achieve by the end of the programme, it is important to recognise that the programme is halfway through, and areas may adapt their plans and alter what they want to achieve, particularly given the COVID-19 pandemic. Big Local areas clearly want to make positive and long-lasting changes in their local communities, including changing how people feel, their skills and confidence levels and their health and wellbeing.

Big Local areas also want to improve how their community looks and provide spaces for people to gather. Additionally, they want to address major and systemic issues in their community, including by reducing poverty rates and increasing employment rates. How residents are trying to achieve these changes varies dramatically and, as will be discussed in the next section, it is important to consider what appropriate and proportionate change looks like for Big Local and the impact that has on positive and lasting changes.

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# What is appropriate and proportionate change for a programme of this kind?

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While it may be premature to understand what positive and lasting change looks like for the whole of the Big Local programme, this section draws on evaluations from previous place-based programmes and Big Local research to explore the nature of making these changes in communities and the extent to which they can be attributed to the programme.

## Big Local areas identify the changes that are appropriate for them

The Big Local programme puts decision-making power into the hands of local communities, trusting them to know the changes that are needed in their area. This is reflected in the Big Local outcomes<sup>3</sup> which were chosen to be broad on purpose, so that Big Local areas would have the flexibility to decide the changes that are most important for them to achieve.

The processes of consulting the community, identifying changes they want to achieve and delivering their Big Local plan, serve as immense learning processes for Big Local partnerships. While the overall changes they want to achieve have relatively stayed the same, “The planned actions to make change happen have altered in the light of progress and achievements as well as increased knowledge about the community, how

best to engage people and greater learning about how to coordinate and work strategically with other organisations and agencies to make change happen” (McCabe et al., 2020: 7).

## What does proportionate look like for other place-based programmes?

Before diving into what proportionate looks like for Big Local, it is important to consider what proportionate looks like for other place-based programmes and the changes they have achieved. In a review of previous place-based initiatives in America, researchers found that the programmes “demonstrated increased neighbourhood capacity in the form of stronger leadership, networks or organisations, and/or improved connections between the neighbourhood and external entities in the public, private and non-profit sectors” (Kubisch et al., 2010: 9). While place-based programmes

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<sup>3</sup> The Big Local outcomes are:

- Communities will be better able to identify local needs and take action in response to them.
- People will have increased skills and confidence, so that they continue to identify and respond to needs in the future.
- The community will make a difference to the needs it prioritises.
- People will feel that their area is an even better place to live.



Photographer: Keighley Big Local

The Keighley Big Local partnership are supporting a local community radio station to promote opportunities or residents to contribute and be heard, as well as develop skills.

are good at increasing the softer outcomes associated with how people feel about their community and their connections with others, they have had “difficulty stimulating economic development, as too many of the forces that drive economic activity are outside of the control of neighbourhood actors” (Kubisch et al, 2010).

Looking at New Deal for Communities (NDC) specifically as an example of a UK place-based programme, the evaluation found that, “the biggest improvements were for indicators of people’s feeling about their neighbourhoods...residents recognise change brought about by the NDC Programme and are more satisfied with their neighbourhoods as places to live” (Batty et al., 2010: 6). This includes changes to the physical environment and people feeling like neighbours and looking out for each other, but across residents in NDC communities, there was little change in how people felt about being able to influence decision-making (Batty et al., 2010).

Overall, this is positive, given that Big Local partnerships, as demonstrated above, are prioritising engagement of residents and, particularly, young people. They are also focusing on improving the local environment, which are the visible changes that residents are most likely to recognise as compared to changes in attitudes and perceptions. But Big Local areas are also trying to bring about positive and lasting

change in the people-based outcomes, working to increase skills, confidence, and health and wellbeing, while reducing isolation. As demonstrated by Kubisch et al. (2010), the extent to which Big Local areas will be able to impact employment rates in their community could be beyond the abilities of a hyperlocal programme; this will be discussed in more detail later in this paper.

## Big Local perspectives on change

This section explores Big Local residents’ perspectives on change, how they have made it happen and the challenges they face as they try to make a difference in their local community. 86 per cent of surveyed Big Local partnership members in 2018 were confident that they would achieve their goals in the long term (Local Trust, 2018). And in Big Local plan assessments in April 2019, 89 per cent of plans were found to have sufficient evidence that they would achieve lasting and sustainable change (Local Trust, 2019a). This overwhelmingly positive view on achieving change in Big Local areas is good news for the programme, and reflects the hard work and time that partnerships have committed to making a difference in their communities; but there are factors beyond their control that may influence the extent to which these changes last beyond the programme.

### **It takes a long time to bring about change**

The long-term nature of the programme offers Big Local partnerships the time to identify changes they want to achieve and then actually deliver their work at their own pace. This increases the likelihood that changes achieved throughout the programme will be “lasting and sustainable as areas take the time they need and make their own decisions about how to tackle identified needs” (James et al., 2014: 12). However, the pace of change is often slower than anticipated and can vary throughout the length of the programme, either slowing or accelerating because of different challenges or opportunities.

As demonstrated in the previous section, other place-based programmes achieved changes around people’s attitudes and connections, but they also demonstrated that community-led change is a naturally long process (University of Cambridge, 2019). This is especially relevant for the Big Local programme as it is volunteer led. As explored in the ‘Place-based funding line of inquiry’, the 10-15 years that each Big Local has to spend its £1.15 million means they are able to go at their own pace.

Moving at each Big Local’s pace is an important part of the programme and allows areas to recover from conflict, periods of low capacity and changing plans as they learn from delivery of activities. But it is also important to recognise that areas all have different starting points and local contexts to work in (see also the place-based funding line of inquiry). The length of time it takes for Big Local areas to bring about change depends on their starting point and their distance travelled.

### **Not all Big Local activities are about making long-term changes**

Because Big Local partnerships have the power to make decisions about their Big Local funding as they respond to need in their community, it is important to recognise that not all of these decisions are specifically about making long-term changes. Big Local areas have invested heavily in community events to bring people together, engage more residents and raise awareness of Big Local. While these events may raise community pride and affect a few people in the long term (for instance, those that go on to volunteer with the Big Local area) the long-term changes overall as a result of the event may be low.

Partnership members have also expressed a tension between feeling they need to put in place some quick wins, to make residents feel as if they are doing things (and doing them well), and planning for more strategic projects that are going to create lasting changes to softer outcomes (McCabe et al., 2017).

The Big Local model supports areas to take risks and try new things with their funding:

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 **The great thing about this project is that it is for ten years. No other funding that I have ever come across has been longer than three! And that means that you can take not uneducated risks, or uncalculated risks, but you can try new things out and there is still room for learning...” - Partnership member**

(McCabe et al., 2017: 69).



Photographer: Andy Atchison

Men of all ages attend Mablethorpe's Men in Sheds project to learn woodworking skills - supported by CCC Big Local.

While these quick wins and projects to try new things may bring about long-lasting changes, such as raising awareness of Big Local and thus being able to engage more people, it is not the only motivation for areas when they fund activities.

### Attributing change to Big Local while working in complex systems

A common challenge for place-based programmes is demonstrating impact or changes that occur as a result of the intervention. In a historical review of place-based approaches, the Institute of Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) found that the most demonstrable changes as a result of a place-based intervention related to the infrastructure or physical environment; but that impacts on more complex issues such as employment, the local economy and health were much harder to prove (Taylor and Buckley, 2017). As Big Local partnerships attempt to address structural issues, such as low employment rates, they may impact them on a small scale, for example, by employing residents as workers<sup>4</sup> (Place-based Line of Inquiry), and so can demonstrate how they have contributed to increasing employment rates. But, given the multiple factors that affect this, it would

be very hard to attribute overall changes to employment rates solely to the impact of the Big Local programme.

Big Local areas have also sought to achieve positive and lasting change under changing and difficult circumstances. Big Local started soon after austerity and has had to manage funding cuts, particularly to youth and play provision, and libraries. While Big Local funding should not be used to provide statutory services, "there are concerns that Big Local is picking up the pieces from the cuts in public services" (McCabe et al., 2017:75). The public services that Big Local areas are funding are not statutory services, rather those that people see the impact of first-hand, such as libraries closing or activities stopping.

Working at such a local level means that there are significant external pressures that are largely out of control of Big Local areas—pressures that could affect residents more than the £1.1m could. This means that Big Local partnerships must be realistic about the changes they want to achieve. It also means that Local Trust and the areas themselves must be cautious when attributing changes to happening as a result of the programme. More broadly, it also means that external factors may negatively impact them more than the £1.1m can positively affect the area.

<sup>4</sup> Big Local is volunteer- and resident-led, but partnerships can choose to fund a local worker to help deliver their Big Local plans. Most of the 150 Big Local areas use some of their Big Local funding for part- or full-time workers. They may be formally employed by the Locally Trusted Organisation (LTO).

## At what level is change happening?

There is good evidence that Big Local areas are working towards long-lasting changes in their local community and that partnership members also feel as if they will accomplish this. There is, however, less data about the extent to which they are making changes at a regional and national policy level, or structural changes within their local community.

Although there are several examples of how Big Local areas have changed the relationship with strategic partners for the better<sup>5</sup>, they have very little control over national and regional policy issues, such as the rollout of Universal Credit and the effects of austerity (McCabe et al., 2020).

There are also limits to what change can happen at a very local level when trends play out nationally and are affected by multiple external factors (Baker and Taylor, 2018). Even at the local level, Big Local partnerships can still feel distanced from the decision-making process and not able to influence it:

**Big Local areas are small and therefore broader influence can be problematic....similarly, when external stakeholders were asked if they perceived the Big Local partnership to be any more significant than other community groups such as tenants and residents' associations, several said 'no'. In particular in urban areas among the many local groups for residents, Big Local [areas] were described as a 'drop in the ocean' locally"**

(McCabe et al., 2019: 5).

There is evidence that Big Local areas can influence and generate some aspects of community wealth building, such as trying to address failing local labour markets, low levels of local economic activity and high debt levels (CLES, 2020). This is demonstrated in case studies of Big Local areas helping people into employment through training, creating credit unions with low interest rates, and supporting local entrepreneurs to launch businesses. While Big Local areas are building community wealth through funding small scale projects, they are not able to fundamentally change the systemic issues in their area.



Photographer: James O Jenkins

Jo and Beki set up The Exchange, in Morecambe, as an art café and shop that houses work from local artists.

<sup>5</sup> Big Local areas' experiences with councils and building developers have been documented in Local Trust research reports. It can be very difficult for Big Local partnerships to build relationships with councils and agencies that work beyond the boundaries of the area, but research demonstrates that trust and open communication can build positive relationships; although there is still a lot of work to be done to cement this into how agencies work with local community groups.



Members of the community in Distington, Cumbria, responsible for the proposed development of dementia-friendly housing led by Big Local, pictured on the site where the houses are planned to be built.

The research found that, while Big Local areas have helped in one or two aspects, few have attempted “to influence the ‘wiring’ of wealth within the local economy” (CLES, 2020: 26). The resident-led line of inquiry in this series talks about the level of power that partnerships have to make decisions and influence local, regional and national issues. Something that comes out quite clearly in the research conducted on Big Local areas so far is that they feel they have limited power over decision-making beyond their local community, which perhaps is not surprising, given how many government decisions have overwhelmingly affected impoverished communities negatively.

Local Trust’s current strategy outlines plans to build capacity in Big Local areas to enable them to “demonstrate their relevance and impact and achieve influence beyond their own boundaries”

(Local Trust, 2020c). Local Trust will also “promote a compelling narrative of thriving, powerful communities and use it to influence, shift mindsets and change behaviour” (Local Trust, 2020c). This support to help Big Local areas understand the bigger picture will allow them to expand their reach and hopefully begin to unpack issues that affect them, such as poverty and low levels of employment. It is also important to recognise that Big Local areas can affect things locally, including at the individual level, which has been highlighted above in the way people feel about their community and in their confidence to bring about change.

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# How can change be measured, while minimising the administrative burden on communities?

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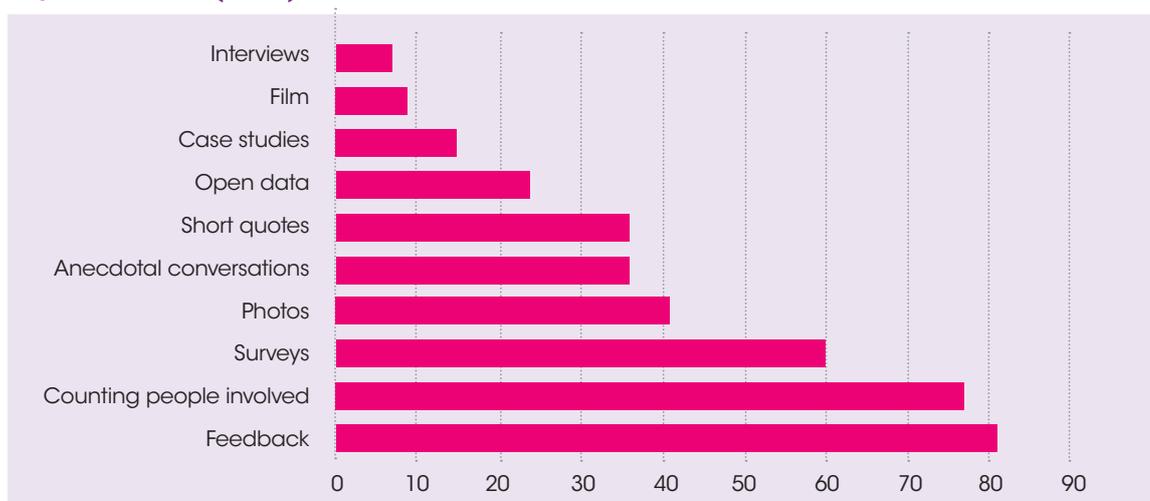
As part of putting residents in the lead, Local Trust wants to ensure partnership members are meaningfully involved in measuring the changes they're making in a way that isn't overburdensome. This section outlines new support to areas to help them measure the changes they're making and early learning from it.

## How do Big Local areas measure change?

The only point at which Local Trust requires each Big Local partnership to report on outcomes and changes achieved is through a plan review at the end of their grant agreement.<sup>6</sup> This is a requirement for submitting their next Big Local plan. The plan review is a set of nine open questions,

and, in line with the non-prescriptive nature of the programme, Big Local areas are able to include relevant information to demonstrate what they've achieved. While this supports partnerships to measure and evaluate changes they have made in ways that work best for them, it means that the information Local Trust collects is inconsistent and varies in quality, making it difficult to analyse at the programme level.

## Methods of data collection used by Big Local partnerships, as identified in plan reviews (2020)



<sup>6</sup> [Plan reviews](#) must be submitted at least once per grant agreement. They ask partnerships to assess their Big Local plan about what they learned and the impact they made. Each Big Local partnership can decide how they want to complete the review and the types of data they include in it.

An analysis of plan reviews conducted in early 2020 found that Big Local areas were using a wide range of methods to evaluate their plans. While the majority of areas focus mainly on monitoring information, such as counting the people involved (51 per cent), and informal feedback (54 per cent), there are a smaller number of areas that are using case studies (10 per cent) and interviews (5 per cent) to evidence changes in their communities. It is also important to note that most areas that use surveys are doing it on a small scale and usually for consultation purposes.

As Local Trust does not require Big Local partnerships to provide systematic data in their plan reviews to evidence their findings, it is not surprising that most areas will instead share information that is easy to collect, such as informal feedback, anecdotal conversations and monitoring data.

## Support to measure changes in Big Local areas

While Big Local areas may not currently be able to commit time and resources to evaluate their plans, there has been growing interest and enthusiasm from partnerships that want to better measure and understand the changes they are making. In response, Local Trust began offering 'measuring change' support in early 2019. The purpose of this is to raise awareness of the importance of measuring changes in Big Local areas and to provide training and support to areas in a flexible and responsive way. The measuring change support is designed to provide Big Local partnerships with the knowledge and skills to decide on the best methods and tools to evaluate their work in the ways that work best for them. It will also help Local Trust understand the best ways to support communities to measure the changes they are making.

There are two main parts of the measuring change support:

- **Training:** available to all 150 Big Local areas, on a variety of topics relating to measuring change, to support areas to share and learn with each other. So far, we have offered 13 training sessions, which have been attended by at least one person from each of 88 Big Local areas.
- **Bespoke support:** working directly with Big Local partnerships for at least one year, the support will co-produce an evaluation, with areas developing a theory of change, collecting and analysing data with the support of a measuring change provider. The residents decide what they want to evaluate, and how. Local Trust is working with 13 Big Local areas currently as part of this bespoke support, and the reports produced will be used as additional evidence about the changes that Big Local areas achieve.

The measuring change support was developed with an emphasis on helping Big Local areas to choose what they want to measure and decide how they are going to do it. This is because of the recognition that, in line with the ethos of the programme, the support should build confidence and enthusiasm for measuring change in Big Local areas.

In an analysis of evaluation forms from four training sessions aimed at helping areas understand the methods they could use to collect data to evaluate their work, 25 per cent of people strongly agreed, and 69 per cent agreed, that they felt confident in their understanding of measuring change (Local Trust, 2019b). Additionally, 27 per cent strongly agreed, and 67 per cent agreed, that they knew the next steps their Big Local needed to make to continue measuring change (Local Trust, 2019b).

From the training and early learning from the bespoke support, there are three emerging motivations coming from Big Local areas for wanting to measure change, which are:

- Attract additional funding
- Share with the community what they have achieved (and possibly engage more people)
- Improve decision-making by learning about what is working or not working so well

And the final piece of learning emerging from the measuring change support is that there is incredible enthusiasm for it, but that, in reality, it slips down priority lists when it comes to actually implementing the lessons. Through the bespoke support, we are seeing that Big Local areas require a lot of support to build confidence and move into the data collection and analysis stage of the support.

Local Trust is conducting an evaluation alongside this support to understand the best ways to support areas to measure change and reduce the administrative burden on communities. The report will be finished in March 2021.

## What we've learned

Big Local areas believe they will make positive and lasting change and achieve their goals by the end of the programme. They are prioritising changes that impact individuals, including how people feel about their area and the skills they have, along with changes to the physical environment. While 39 per cent of Big Local areas want to improve health and wellbeing in the area, and 26 per cent want to increase employment rates, evaluations from other place-based programmes suggest these structural changes are likely to be beyond the control of the programme and very difficult to influence.

When exploring what proportionate change is for the Big Local programme, it is important to consider the starting points for each area and the national and local contexts they are working in. As Big Local areas have had to weather austerity, Brexit, different governments and other national changes, the amount of positive change they make may be limited. They may instead be working to make their community less worse off as a result of these issues that go beyond the programme. There is evidence that Big Local areas are working to address structural changes in their local economies and change relationships with local councils and building developers, but the areas are often addressing just one aspect of each problem, rather than tackling the systemic issue. Even when Big Local areas do address these structural issues, it can be hard to attribute changes specifically to the programme. But Local Trust is committed to supporting areas to influence beyond the boundaries of their area and understand the changes they are making now and beyond the programme.

Going forward, there are several planned research projects which will seek to understand the changes that Big Local partnerships are bringing about in the wider community. We also want to understand the best ways to support community-led evaluations. We will continue to provide measuring change support across Big Local areas to support areas to understand the changes they are making and collect data to evidence these changes in ways that suit them best.

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## About Local Trust

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

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

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