



**Local Trust**  
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people

# Power in our hands:

An inquiry into resident-led  
decision making 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 Lucy Terry. July 2020.

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Cover photo: Ann Marie and Alison, volunteers at the L30 Big Local Netherton Community Garden project, near Liverpool.  
Photo credit: Andrew Aitchison.





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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, 2019e) 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 **resident-led decision making and action** inquiry and seeks to answer the following questions:

- What does resident-led decision-making look like?
- Do resident-led models lead to a transfer of power to communities?





Members of the Gaunless Gateway Big Local partnership standing next to a poster encouraging local residents to get involved in the programme.

## 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 inquiry review went on to review the remaining sources and produce three summary papers for each line of inquiry.

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# What does resident-led decision-making look like?

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The evidence from Local Trust's research shows that resident-led decision-making is a complex process. There are many examples of how it is thriving, and, across the programme, it seems to be developing positively, with residents in the lead on Big Local partnerships.<sup>1</sup> There are also challenges associated with resident-led decision-making. These include the representativeness of partnership members of their local community; the emotional toll put on partnership members; power dynamics; disagreements and, less often, serious conflict. Yet there is promising evidence that these challenges can be overcome, and that the experience of tackling them may even strengthen residents' ability and confidence to make decisions.

The rest of this section will explore what resident-led decision-making looks like, starting with 'resident-led' and then 'decision-making'.

## Are residents in the lead?

Local Trust's criteria are the starting point for resident-led decision-making. There should be at least eight members of a Big Local partnership, over half of whom should be residents of the Big Local area boundary, while not representing any other organisation.<sup>2</sup> The remaining partnership members often represent local organisations such as the local authority, a housing association or a charity.

Partnership review<sup>3</sup> data suggest that, in the majority of cases, partnerships comply with this criteria and residents are in the lead. In 2019, partnerships had, on average, eleven members. Nearly three-quarters of members were residents — a slight but positive improvement over earlier years.

In 2019, 24 areas did not meet the criteria, either because they had fewer than eight members or that less than 50 per cent were resident members (Local Trust, 2019b).

Partnership members themselves also feel that residents are in the lead. In 2018, 78.3 per cent of partnership members agreed that, *"Residents are leading Big Local in our*

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<sup>1</sup> Big Local partnerships are a group 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: <https://localtrust.org.uk/big-local/programme-guidance/big-local-partnerships/>

<sup>2</sup> Criteria for Big Local partnerships are outlined at: <https://localtrust.org.uk/big-local/programme-guidance/big-local-partnerships/>

<sup>3</sup> The partnership review is an annual review of current partnership members for each Big Local area, carried out by Local Trust.

### Summary of partnership review data (Local Trust, 2015-2019)

	Residents on Big Local Partnerships - Total	Per cent residents	Non-residents - total	Percent non-residents
2015	1118	68%	519	32%
2016	1288	67%	637	33%
2017	1153	72%	452	28%
2018	1196	73%	439	27%
2019	1219	73%	447	27%

area” (2018 partnership members’ survey<sup>4</sup>). Interestingly, the proportion of residents who disagreed with this statement was fairly similar in 2014 and 2018 (11 per cent in 2014, according to James et al, 2014, and 11.5 per cent in the 2018 partnership members’ survey). This reflects that, while partnership members usually feel that the resident-led principle works in practice, there will always be a minority for whom it is not working. This could be as a result of the range of challenges that resident-led decision-making brings. This minority of respondents may not be the same people or in the same areas year on year, as challenges can vary, and ebb and flow in a partnership’s lifetime.

### Role of non-residents

The remaining members of the partnerships may be professionals from the local statutory or voluntary sectors, councillors, Big Local workers<sup>5</sup>, or LTO (Locally Trusted Organisation)<sup>6</sup> staff. Local Trust reps (whose role is discussed more in the place-based paper in this series)<sup>7</sup> and locally employed workers work closely with the partnership and may influence decisions in different ways (McCabe et al, 2018a), which is also discussed in the second section of this paper). There is an issue about residents who have dual roles—a common example is that of resident councillors, who may have conflicting interests or be too partisan. In some cases, councillors are excluded from partnerships (*ibid*). This will be discussed more in the next section as it crosses over into questions of power.

<sup>4</sup> The partnership member survey is a biennial survey of partnership members carried out by Local Trust; it is the main vehicle for Local Trust to understand the opinions and experiences of all 150 partnerships.

<sup>5</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.

<sup>6</sup> LTOs: Locally Trusted Organisations (LTOS) are the organisations chosen by Big Local partnerships to administer and account for the distribution of their funding - <https://localtrust.org.uk/big-local/programme-guidance/locally-trusted-organisations/>

<sup>7</sup> Reps act as a critical friend, to provide information, advice, guidance and constructive challenge. They are also representatives of Local Trust and act as the organisation’s “eyes, ears and voice”: <https://localtrust.org.uk/big-local/ reps/>

## Which residents do and do not get involved?

While residents do appear to genuinely be in the lead in Big Local, there is a question of which residents are actively involved in decision-making. There are different reasons why some residents do not get involved, and it should be noted that this is typical of national trends.

Partnership members appear to be more educated and older than the general population: 39.1 per cent have a degree and 47.2 per cent are between the ages of 45 and 64, according to the 2018 partnership members survey. The 2019 partnership review reinforced the fact that partnership members are older than the average population. It also found that 86 per cent are white and around 60 per cent female, with a disproportionate gap between female chairs and female partnership members (Local Trust, 2019b). The majority of reps feel that partnership members reflect their community 'partially' according to Local Trust's 2019 partnership review summary (Local Trust, 2019b).

How representative these figures are, particularly on ethnicity, will vary from area to area, as Big Local areas range from those within major cities to small coastal towns and rural villages. There is no requirement for partnership members to represent regions or demographics within their Big Local area. Rather, there are mechanisms which encourage Big Local partnerships to ensure they have incorporated the views of their wider community. For example, programme guidance states that an area's plan should be based on "the views you've gathered from a wide range of people in your local community" and data about the local area, as well as what has been learnt from previous plans. This guidance is

accompanied by information and tools to help partnerships incorporate community views.<sup>8</sup>

There is a feeling among some partnership members that they represent a small minority within their area, in contrast to the majority who don't know or care about Big Local. In the 2018 partnership members' survey, 61 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that, "*people outside our partnership are not aware of the progress we're making*," although 58 per cent agreed that "*residents outside the partnership know about Big Local*." Sometimes, the majority of residents in an area are characterised as apathetic, in contrast to the small minority of residents who are actively involved in a Big Local (McCabe et al, 2018a).

But there is no evidence that other residents don't get involved because they don't care when it may be due to other reasons—for example, the reality that surviving poverty consumes people's energy and limits their capacity to get involved in community activism (Baker and Taylor, 2018). An evaluation of the programme's early years pointed out that Big Local is a substantial time commitment for many of its volunteers and this will affect who can get involved (James et al, 2014).

In some cases, residents may be consciously or unconsciously excluded by those on the partnership. Transient communities may be perceived as 'hard to engage', while migrants can be demonised as 'other', in contrast to a settled community that sees itself as under threat (Fancourt and Usher, 2019). However, there is also evidence, described in more detail below (under 'models and structures used to make decisions') that partnerships are trying to make decision-making a more open and inclusive process.

<sup>8</sup> See Local Trust's programme guidance at <https://localtrust.org.uk/big-local/programme-guidance/the-big-local-plan/>.





Local residents and partnership members from Growing Together Northampton pose for a group photo in the local neighbourhood.

Whatever the reasons that more people don't get involved, it is a nationally observed trend that a disproportionate amount of volunteering time is given by only a small group of people, known as the 'civic core' (Hornung et al, 2017). And, finally, it should be noted that much of the data we have on this topic is about partnership members (e.g. the annual partnership review, the biennial partnership members' survey). However, some volunteers are actively involved in Big Local but are not on the partnership; future research on Big Local volunteers will be able to say more about this group.

## Making decisions together

Research on resident-led decision-making in practice reflects the complexity and challenges inherent in collaboration. Decision-making is about more than just who has a vote or who sits on the partnership. There is evidence that Big Local residents have, over time, developed collective skills to make decisions. Cases of conflict and breakdown in decision-making also yield insights into the Big Local process, showing that progress is a rocky path.

The models and structures used to make decisions have been surprisingly formal for a volunteer-led programme, but there is evidence of more creative and open methods used as well.

## Progress made towards collective decision-making

**It's about who shapes the conversation, not just who takes the decisions. [...] For [a] majority of the partnership it was the first time they had been in this position. These people are now really good scrutinisers, good at challenging, good at lateral thinking but at the beginning would have kept quiet"**

(McCabe et al, 2018a: 4)

The above quote shows the skills needed to make decisions within a programme like Big Local and how residents have, over time, developed these skills. The 2018 partnership members' survey also reflected some of the skills developed in resident-led decision-making, such as identifying local need, developing a plan to address that need, and dealing with disagreement:

- In 2018, 86.1 per cent of partnership members agreed or strongly agreed that, *"We have made the right decisions about what is needed in our area."*
- 83.1 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that, *"We [our Big Local area] have a shared understanding of how we are going to achieve our priorities."*
- 79.2 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that, *"We are able to deal constructively with disagreements or conflicts."*

It can be a lot of effort to maintain the process of making decisions; a diary keeper quoted in McCabe et al (2020: 38) reflected “..on the amount of work required, often behind the scenes, to ‘clear the waters’ and keep plans positive and moving forward”. However, in the majority of cases, it does work. According to the Area Assessment Tool<sup>9</sup> (AAT) v3 (Local Trust, 2019c), when reps were asked whether partnerships were “consistently able to make decisions in a timely and appropriate way,” 129 out of 150 areas’ reps said, “Yes”. The Our Bigger Story (OBS) evaluation assesses the ongoing maturity of the decision-making of partnerships in 15 areas. In 2017, they judged that the majority of the partnerships were in a ‘fragile maturity’ stage: “Partnerships were better able to make complex decisions (maturity) but could be fragile as they are relying on a small group of activists.” In 2020, this was still the case for the majority of partnerships but four or five had moved on to ‘sturdy’: “..they have some

*dynamism in that new people have joined the partnership / taken on new roles”* (McCabe et al, 2020: 43). This reflects both how much progress has been made but also how much time this progress takes. Partnerships are moving through various stages of maturity and may be taken off-course at any point if decision-making breaks down.

### What happens when resident-led decision-making doesn’t work?

Disagreement is a healthy part of making decisions, but in a few cases, conflicts and tensions reach a point where a partnership is at risk of implosion. AAT v3 (Local Trust, 2019c) shows that, in 2019, 15 per cent of Big Local areas (23) had disagreements or clashes that impeded their work. Only a minority of these situations involved formal complaints or required intervention by Local Trust. In 2019, seven areas received



Photographer: Louise Tickle

In Brookside Big Local, partnership members work hard to be inclusive. Meetings have moved from a boardroom to an informal setting where children are welcome and the approach is more relaxed.

<sup>9</sup> The Area Assessment Tool (AAT) is a programme-wide data collection system drawing on multiple different sources.

additional support from Local Trust, including dispute-resolution; or were the subject of an official complaint.

Conflict within Big Local areas is intense and emotional, as it happens with neighbours and friends, and so managing it is particularly hard (McCabe et al, 2018b). However, in general, serious disagreements are resolved. Seven of the 29 areas experiencing disagreements or clashes in 2018 continued to experience this in 2019, meaning most areas appear to resolve these issues. Future research could explore what happens at the stage before a breakdown, at times of high tension and disagreement: which residents end up making decisions and why, and how might this affect decision-making over the long term?

## **Models, structures and techniques used to make decisions**

There are different models and structures used to make decisions within Big Local areas. The AAT v3 (Local Trust, 2019c) asks reps to choose one of three models that describes a partnership's approach most accurately. The most common structure is the 'partnership as executive' model, selected by 69 areas' reps. Within this model, the partnership acts as a tight team, controlling the Big Local funding closely. The second most common model is 'distributed leadership' with working groups on different topics (43 areas). 34 areas are using a model described as 'enabling', building capacity and making grants as and when opportunities arise.

At the beginning of the Big Local programme, there was a tendency for areas to use formal, conventional decision-making processes and structures that echoed local authority or large charity structures and processes. This may have reflected who initiated and first joined Big

Local partnerships (Powell et al, 2020, not yet published). This formality could help bring credibility when working with local agencies, but, on the other hand, could exclude people less familiar with these ways of doing things (James et al, 2014).

The AAT data on models of decision-making above suggest that there is still generally an emphasis on a formal approach, perhaps because partnership members see it as a way to demonstrate accountability McCabe et al (2020). The concern about the formality of decision-making being a barrier to wider participation remains in McCabe et al (2020). It may be that a different resident-led programme, with different guidance and emphasis at the beginning, would see more variation in approaches to decision-making; from Big Local we do know that resident-led decision-making can look quite conventional on the surface.

However, evidence suggests that decision-making is developing and expanding in different ways. For example, areas have increased inclusivity by incorporating play areas for small children in meeting spaces (Powell et al, 2020, not yet published). Areas are also finding creative ways to engage the wider community who are not on the partnership. Some areas have used techniques such as participatory budgeting, open-space events and citizens' juries. Additionally, festivals and fun activities are a source of consultation: in one area, gardening and bake-and-taste groups are used for this purpose (Local Trust, 2018a).

A Local Trust (2018c) literature review of different skills required by community leaders found that these are particularly diverse, covering strategy and vision, relationship-building and implementation, which suggests that leadership needs to be distributed across a range of people. The review summarised the research on shared leadership, which is now a key



principle within the Community Leadership Academy, a new Local Trust programme.

There are varying levels of shared or dispersed leadership within Big Local partnerships. Many areas delegate responsibilities to specific task or project groups (the distributed model, as identified by reps, above). This does not necessarily represent fully shared leadership, but it can, in time, give people brought through a specific project group the confidence to challenge decision-makers on the partnership (Powell et al, 2020, not yet published). Some other practical ways of sharing leadership are described in McCabe et al (2018b), such as training new people to take over a project. Anecdotally, we have heard of areas moving away from having fixed positional leadership such as a chair or vice-chair.

Finally, there is a question of how much decision-making happens outside the partnership. OBS quotes interviewees who question whether Local Trust focuses too much on the partnership, when the partnership can be a vehicle to support community leadership and resident-led approaches in the wider community (McCabe et al, 2018b). The partnership is the platform to make decisions about Big Local and will be the focus of attention and analysis; however, it is also true that decision-making can and does happen more broadly. The examples above of creative ways of consulting the wider community demonstrate this, as do area-wide consultations and events, young people's panels and specific task groups, as well as other initiatives, such as the Street Champions' model (McCabe et al, 2018b).

## What we've learned

The review shows us that resident-led decision-making and agency for residents are a reality within Big Local. Residents are leading partnerships which oversee decisions about how the money is spent in their area. Resident-led decision-making is often complex; it can be emotionally challenging and there is a lot of effort required to keep things on track. Some of the challenges in resident-led decision-making are about representativeness: who gets involved can be limited, and the structures used for resident-led decision-making look surprisingly formal on the surface. Yet there are many cases of creative, interesting ways that partnerships are using to draw in the wider community, even if the formal structures and processes tend to remain.

While evidence suggests that partnerships tend to be developing positively, progress comes with troughs as well as peaks, such as conflict, and decision-making breaking down. Time is needed to overcome these barriers; further research could explore how conflict affects the process of decision-making in the short and long term. There is more to explore about how power interacts with decision-making—what we know about this so far will be explored in the next section. This review also suggests that it would be beneficial to understand more about Big Local residents outside the partnership, for example, volunteers who participate in Big Local but do not sit on the partnership.



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# Do resident-led models lead to a transfer of power to communities?

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Historically, empowerment initiatives have not represented genuine power in communities. Communities have not had enough or any real decision-making power; they are accountable to centrally decided targets; and the issues which affect their lives in the most substantial ways are out of their sphere of influence.

This paper will explore how the design of the Big Local model addresses some of these historical weaknesses. It then demonstrates that there is good evidence for Big Local areas, especially partnership members, developing 'power within' and 'power to' (see below) as a result of having genuine decision-making capacity. In addition, in some areas, partnerships have built effective relationships with local powerful institutions, in some cases managing to successfully influence them and resist the limiting power of these institutions. However, this type of power is harder to achieve and there is less evidence of a local transfer of power. Finally, there are factors at the partnership level that may prevent (some) residents or parts of the community having power. We know less about how power dynamics play out between residents, but there is some broad information available.

## What types of power are there?

Before considering the evidence in response to this question, it is useful to consider the different types of power. Popay et al (2020) highlights different forms of power, both 'emancipatory' and 'limiting'. Their framework shows that power is both about the internal capabilities of a

community and about having control over external structures and conditions that drive inequality. They have also developed markers of these different forms of power, so there will be further evidence developed within phase three of the study (due to finish in 2021). The framework adapts the different types of power described in Gaventa (Local Trust, 2018b).

- *Power within* refers to internal capabilities, including confidence, awareness and recognition of shared values: for example, developing a shared vision.
- *Power with* refers to partnerships and collaboration with others, for example collective action and alliance building.
- *Power to* is about the capacity to act and to exercise agency. Examples relevant to Big Local may include the formation of inclusive governance structures, or to improved social, cultural or economic conditions through collective action by residents.
- *Power over* is zero-sum, unlike the above three types, so it involves one party losing power as the other gains. It can be emancipatory: for example, a community might stop an organisation from doing something negative in their neighbourhood. It can also be oppressive.

Adapted from Local Trust (2018b) and Popay et al (2020).

Popay et al's (2020) framework also describes the different forms of limiting power. Until these forms of power are tackled, residents only have so much power. However, residents can gain different forms of power through resisting power that is limiting.

### **The design of the Big Local model: concentrating decision-making within communities**

As the place-based paper in this series explores, historic area-based initiatives have been criticised for leaving residents on the margins of initiatives. The term 'empowerment' has been specifically critiqued for downplaying the significance of structural inequality, and thus becoming complicit in it: communities cannot become more powerful simply by being encouraged to "come together, organise and improve the quality of their lives" (Baker and Taylor quoted in Local Trust, 2018a: 2).

In many ways, the Big Local model does, on the other hand, represent genuine decision-making concentrated within the hands of communities—the million is ringfenced for a community and cannot be lost or competed for; partnerships must be at least 50 per cent resident; plans are endorsed, not approved; and there are no annual spend requirements, targets or externally imposed goals (James et al, 2014 and Local Trust, 2018a). As a result, it arguably constitutes a transfer of power from the National Lottery Community Fund to communities—the Lottery has lost power over decision-making (or it has given it up) and residents have gained it.

Some power remains with Local Trust. Its soft power may influence local decision-making. For example, Local Trust staff may make suggestions informally or formally to a partnership that may be considered to carry more weight, depending on who they are coming from. Local Trust also manages reps (who are contractors) and determines the confines of their role. Local Trust also has the power to require a partnership to accept some form of external support: in extreme circumstances, where a conflict cannot be resolved locally.<sup>10</sup> The place-based paper in this series goes into more detail about how Local Trust provides support to areas. Future research could explore what soft power or influence means within Local Trust's role in providing support and funding to areas.

Big Local cannot fully address the structural causes of inequality or limiting forms of power. So, while residents do have decision-making power over a specific fund, there is a risk that they are still powerless to influence the policy that shapes people's lives (Popay et al, 2020). In some ways, the Big Local programme supports communities to tackle these structural determinants. For example, Baker and Taylor (2018) note that there is reduced and weakened social infrastructure due to, in part, the decline of unions, a shift to online shopping, closure of post offices and cuts to public services such as libraries. Big Local has addressed this by supporting areas to create new spaces for social and community use (see the place-based paper in this series).

And, in recognition of this, Local Trust support has more recently begun to address systems change and policy influencing (through learning clusters and Big Local Connects), as well as introducing a policy function to call for more funds to

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<sup>10</sup> Local Trust's page on areas experiencing conflict: <https://localtrust.org.uk/big-local/programme-guidance/support-where-big-local-areas-are-experiencing-difficulties-or-conflict/>

be devolved to communities.<sup>11</sup> This is a key part of Local Trust's Strategy to 2026 (Local Trust, 2020).

## How Big Local develops community power 'within' and 'to'

Residents have been given power within the Big Local model. However, it takes time for residents to develop confidence and a group identity—markers of power within—meaning that they can collectively lead decision making. Developing this at a group level is particularly challenging, as shown in the first section of this line of inquiry.


But there is good evidence of progress, especially for partnership members. In the 2018 partnership members' survey, 87.2 per cent agree or strongly agreed that *"we [our partnership] are confident that we can identify what is needed to make our area feel like an even better place to live"*. Evaluations of Big Local have explored the confidence, leadership skills and self-belief residents gain as a result of their involvement in Big Local:

 **'[Partnership member] came into this project completely new to all this stuff [...] now he knows how to get funding, who to speak to, you know, where the [layers of influence] are'.**

McCabe et al (2020: 10)

In some cases, power within is developed through the experience of working with other agencies which (intentionally or not) undermine the resident-led nature of the

project. In one example, Big Local residents discussed how professionals and agencies taking over decision-making meant they became conscious of the power dynamics and learnt how to challenge them and lead more effectively (McCabe et al, 2020: 14), as the following shows:

 **So, when you said, "Well, we want to shape the service like that," and they would just come back and go, "Oh, no, no, we don't do that." So, I think the relationship was never quite there.' R1: 'But we've learnt, as well. We've learnt not just how to handle them, if you like, but work with them, also be quite clear, or clearer, on what we wanted. Whereas I think we were a little bit, "They're the professionals, they're providing the service," and that probably was a... not a mistake, because we didn't know any better.'**

Powell et al (2020) note that Big Local residents were observed challenging limiting power, for example, taking back control of the partnership from councils—resisting institutional power; and resisting productive power by challenging negative portrayals of their area and offering alternative positive narratives and shared understanding. Sometimes, the confidence to do this within an institutional space comes from the experience of Big Local decision-making.

There is also evidence of residents developing 'power to': collective capabilities associated with implementation, establishing action or decisions. Section 1 of this line of inquiry

<sup>11</sup> For example, see the Community Wealth Fund campaign <https://localtrust.org.uk/policy/community-wealth-fund-alliance/>



A community health champion, funded by Kingsbrook and Cauldwell Big Local, was so successful it led to the local CCG allocating money to develop the scheme further.

showed how residents have successfully maintained spaces for collective decision-making (the partnership). The paper on place-based funding goes into more detail about the wider initiatives that have been developed through Big Local, such as community hubs.

Based on their in-depth study of 10 Big Local areas, Powell et al (2020) concluded that the spaces created through Big Local do appear to support the development of community power and enable this power to be used to resist power that is limiting.

## Residents influencing decision-makers

However, developing these types of power, which are generative, does not necessarily equate to gaining power over others, and, specifically, power over local, powerful institutions. This has been more challenging. The evidence suggests that residents have made substantial progress from a very difficult start, but their influence is still limited.

Big Local partnership members seem to agree broadly that the Big Local programme is giving them more control over what happens in their area (75.7 per cent agreed or strongly agreed in the 2018 survey), but it is not clear whether this is directly because of the £1million, or because of stronger influencing power over decisions made locally. In the same

survey, 70.8 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that “the partnership is able to influence decision-making in our area”—still positive, but not as high as the previous figure about general control. There are some examples of how residents have worked with local decision-makers to effect change (power with), such as the Lakes project in Northampton where Growing Together Big Local initiated joint working between Big Local, the Environment Agency and the local authority to make the project happen (McCabe et al, 2020). This is explored more in the paper on positive and lasting change.

## Barriers to influencing local power

Especially initially, local councillors and officers often had difficulty understanding the purpose and ethos of Big Local. There was resistance from existing power holders (James et al, 2014) and resistance to another local body having control and power over money (Tjoa, 2018). In some cases, councillors “had drawn up plans for how the money was to be spent,” following the announcement that an area would be getting a million pounds (McCabe et al, 2019: 4).


This lack of understanding remains. In McCabe et al (2019) interviewees from councils and voluntary sectors showed frustration at the slow pace of Big Local and a feeling that, if the council led it things would go faster—reflecting a lack



of understanding of the ethos of the programme and the benefits of resident-led approaches.

Residents also face a combination of prejudice and lack of familiarity with local political systems when navigating local institutions. Some Big Local partnerships have said that they struggled to get health agencies to take seriously the work they are doing and the issues they are raising—to see them as legitimate players (Baker et al, 2016). OBS research states that:

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 **Perspectives from the ‘outside’....tend to value partnerships which are comprised of ‘professional’ and articulate people, suggesting....that middle-class involvement is needed in order to mobilise effectively”**


(McCabe et al, 2019: 2).

Finally, a barrier to influencing power is the scale of Big Local and how that matches up with the level at which policy decisions are made. This is covered in more detail in the paper on positive and lasting change.

### **Embedding residents’ power in the system**

Research suggests that where residents have successfully influenced local politicians and institutions, this tends to be dependent on personal connections, rather than being embedded in structures and mechanisms. Links with local councils are often:

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 **..at the operational, rather than strategic, level, and can depend on the quality of personal relationships rather than being systematically built into structural/ policy frameworks”**

(McCabe et al, 2019: 1).

We know from the partnership members’ survey that some feel they have good relationships with local politicians, but there is a question of at what level and to what effect.

Wider research commissioned by Local Trust shows that more radical reform of the public sector would be needed to truly transfer power. Lent et al (2019) points out that where community commissioning currently exists, it is often for discretionary, non-core services— seen as less risky and less of a threat to the organisational identity of the public sector. An example of something more radical is the Citizens’ Assembly of Gdansk, Poland, which is profiled in Lent et al (2019). In Gdansk, the assembly’s decision is binding and so, if 80 per cent of participants (who must all be residents of the city) back a certain course of action, the city government is obliged to implement it.

This highlights the context in which Big Local and other resident-led models are operating. Radical reform would be needed to change the concentration of power within local authorities and other authorities (e.g. health). Big Local represents a transfer of power between the funder (the National Lottery Community Fund) and its beneficiaries, but not between the state and people.


### **Power dynamics within Big Local areas: power at the partnership level**

Power dynamics interact with decision-making, affecting the partnership in complex ways, and there is scope for more research to unpick this. There are cases where power dynamics prevent residents from having control over decision-making, as non-residents take over or prevent certain residents from being included in decision-making while others dominate. Residents can also resist inappropriate use of power at the partnership level to restore resident-led decision-making.

Data from our programme-wide tools suggest that at any one time a sizeable minority of Big Local partnerships will be dominated by an individual or group of individuals. In the 2018 partnership members' survey, 37.8 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that *"it feels like a few individuals dominate our partnership"* (this does not necessarily indicate inappropriate use of power). AAT v3 (Local Trust, 2019c) records that in 34 out of 150 areas, reps stated there was a person or group that dominated decision-making. In seven out of 150 areas, reps stated that decisions are dominated by non-residents (a clearer indication of inappropriate power imbalance, in a much smaller minority of areas).

### Non-residents within the partnership

Locally Trusted Organisations (LTOs), as the bodies who manage the money, can represent a barrier to resident power within Big Local. They have opportunities to commission something different from what the partnership intended—giving them more power than the model intends. In one example discussed in McCabe et al (2020: 15), partnership members were effectively excluded from oversight of delivery:

 **'[Resident]1: It was [names LTO] who seemed to be telling them what it was we wanted them to do, rather than us. ... [Resident]2: 'So, they would go straight to [names LTO] when they had questions, and the partnership, or Big Local, were, sort of, really out of the picture altogether.'"**

An evaluation of the programme's early years noted that some LTOs *"...have been found to have a different understanding of what Big Local is about to that of reps or residents, or different views about what resident-leadership should look like"* (James et al, 2014: 19). Six years on, we

would expect this understanding to have developed positively. How LTOs support or undermine resident-led approaches could be explored further through new research.

Workers can also exercise inappropriate power and become decision-makers. According to AAT (v3), in 19 out of 150 partnerships, decisions are dominated by the worker/ workers. This might be because sometimes, residents defer to professional expertise: *"Residents could defer to professionals sitting on the partnership and/or rely on workers to guide, or indeed dominate, decision-making processes"* (McCabe et al, 2020: 38). In other cases, the power imbalance is more overt: a diary keeper in OBS research recorded a time when workers were *"...shouting at us and trying to bully us into making a decision"* (McCabe et al, 2020: 38).

In some cases, inappropriate worker power comes about because the residents have not yet developed the confidence to lead assertively. *"It's our fault for not telling, you know, 'We will make the decisions and we will tell you what we want done'"* (a resident quoted in McCabe et al, 2020: 24).

A survey of Big Local workers (Local Trust, 2019a) shows that there is a distinct category of resident workers which blurs the boundary. 27 per cent of Big Local workers are also residents in the Big Local area they work in. Resident workers are more likely to have been a member of their partnership before and are less likely to have a degree or relevant work experience. Future research could explore what happens in cases when a volunteer resident becomes a worker—what approach do they take to making or influencing decisions then?

Reps also have implicit power to influence decisions; however, McCabe et al (2020) state that generally they are seen as supportive and not unduly influential. The role of the rep is discussed more in the place-based paper in this series.

### Power dynamics between residents

As a result of these power dynamics obstructing residents' power, there are Big Local areas which have decided to hold resident-only partnership meetings without workers or to exclude elected members from meetings. And, as noted above, residents often develop power within from the experience of challenging power dynamics.

However, there is also a question of power dynamics among and between residents. The partnership itself—in effect a closed space—may be experienced as an institutional limiting power by other residents within a Big Local area (Local Trust, 2018b). Restrictive criteria for membership are being introduced in some areas, sometimes on grounds of efficiency (Powell et al, 2020). The first section of this paper shows that partnerships are limited in how representative they are, and how the way they make decisions can be exclusionary. According to reps, in 15 out of 150 partnerships, decisions are dominated by a single resident or small group of residents (AAT v3: Local Trust, 2019c).

We do know that there are also positive ways in which people challenge institutional power on the partnership within Big Local. For example, project spaces, which are set up to deliver a specific project or task, can help people develop power within as they learn skills through collaboration and also develop power to act. These spaces give people legitimacy to be recognised as experts in their field, which in turn give them confidence to challenge institutional power in the partnership (Powell et al, 2020). This also reminds us that resident-led decision making can happen outside the partnership; we have less data about this.

There is also a consideration of what happens when partnerships become legal bodies such as charitable incorporated organisations, community interest companies, or community benefit societies. Do they continue to act on behalf of the community, or do they have an interest in maintaining the structure? (McCabe et al, 2020).

Working together on Big Local, residents form strong relationships with each other and learn to collaborate.



Beyond the data we have on reps' impressions of how decisions are made, we know relatively little about how the process of making decisions plays out within the partnership, and what role different actors/stakeholders play. This would be interesting to explore through field research. The evaluation of the Community Leadership Academy (forthcoming) will also add to our knowledge in this area, as we begin to understand more about how Big Local residents respond and engage to different concepts of leadership, including shared leadership.

## What we've learned

An understanding of different types of power help us understand what power residents have as a result of Big Local and what types of power are more limited in a hyperlocal, resident-led programme. As a model, Big Local represents genuine decision-making and agency for local residents and is more ambitious than previous area-based initiatives. And there is evidence that because of their experience of Big Local, residents are developing substantial power within, often through difficult experiences and challenging the oppressive dynamics of others. This can be a substantial learning experience and also shows the value of the long-term nature of resident-led models, as it gives time to identify these power dynamics and repair things.

However, influencing powerful institutions is challenging and, where it succeeds, is often at the operational level and dependent on personal relationships. There is a need for radical systems reform in order for this power dynamic to shift permanently and represent a true local transfer of power. Finally, there is more to understand about how power dynamics within the partnership might shape decision-making and agency on the ground.



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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.

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**Local Trust**

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