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# Power in Big Local – scoping literature review

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*A version of this paper was published internally by Local Trust in 2018. This version has been lightly edited to make it accessible for a general audience, with core terms and concepts explained wherever possible. Please refer to [our website](#) for more information about the structure and goals of Local Trust.*

## Research questions and structure of the literature review

This literature review aims to inform work on the theme of power and set out areas of interest to explore further. It addresses three main research questions around power and the Big Local programme:

1. What is the importance of power to communities and community development?
2. Is power transferred to communities in Big Local? This splits into two main areas of interest:
  - Whether there is power directly deriving from communities having to spend £1.15 million how they wish
  - Whether the Big Local programme provides power through access to existing power networks that were previously difficult for residents to access
3. What is the significance of power relations within Big Local partnerships?

The literature review is split into two parts. The first part addresses research question one, identifying definitions of power and looking at broader literature on power in communities. The second part explores power in Big Local, drawing on research conducted on Big Local so far, addressing research questions two and three.

## Power in communities

As with many big concepts, there is a danger of getting bogged down in the extensive and often contentious literature on power. For example, there is economic power and political power, as well as power related to ethnicity and gender (Foucault, 1977 and Bourdieu, 1989, p.14-25). To circumvent this challenge, this review concentrates on existing literature looking at power in communities and community development research. This work often, although not exclusively, concentrates on power at a relatively local level. It also tends to focus on communities lacking in power in some way, therefore needing to be empowered. It is important to unpack these concepts.

## Power

Power in its most basic conception suggests an individual and/or group with some type of control over another individual and/or group. But there are myriad forms. Gaventa identifies other types of power, in addition to this commonly used conception (2006, p. 24):

- Power 'over' refers to the ability of the powerful to affect the actions and thought of the powerless
- The power 'to' is important for the capacity to act; to exercise agency and to realise the potential of rights, citizenship, or voice
- Power 'within' often refers to gaining the sense of self-identity, confidence and awareness that is a precondition for action
- Power 'with' refers to the synergy which can emerge through partnerships and collaboration with others, or through processes of collective action and alliance building

This suggests a more diverse understanding of power than just the most common notion of power over others. These are important conceptual categorisations that can provide realistic goals for community development work to aim for and are useful for Big Local, and indeed have been adapted by the School of Public Health Research (SPHR) in the Big Local *Communities in Control* study, which will be explored in part two.

## 'Empowering' communities

Intertwined with power, and the absence of power, is the notion of empowerment. Again, a contested concept, it has been broadly defined as: "enhancing people's capacity to influence the decisions that affect their lives and is a central principle of community development" (Gilchrist, A. 2009, p.66).

There are several critiques of empowerment. Firstly, that if it ignores the bigger picture, particularly in terms of structural inequality, it can become complicit in getting poorer communities to 'accept their lot', rather than challenging these forces:

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"Empowerment is a transformative concept but without a critical analysis it is all too often applied naively to confidence and self-esteem at a personal level, within a paradigm of social pathology, a purpose that is usually associated with personal responsibility for lifting oneself out of poverty, overlooking structural analyses of inequality." (Ledwith, M. 2011, p.13)

A perennial debate around this issue is the extent that empowerment work can and should deal with broader power distribution. This was recently discussed as part of an *Empowered Communities in the 2020s* workshop. Concerns were expressed that empowerment work should also address altering the power relationships between communities and powerful institutions, as well as tackling the structural aspects that inhibit community power (IVAR. 2017, p. 4). Another issue raised was the paternalistic echoes of the language. Empowerment implies a distinction between the empowerer and the empowered and is therefore still about doing to.

# Dispersal of power and empowerment initiatives in the UK

Gaventa's 'power cube', presented in Figure 1, incorporates different levels of power and types of spaces

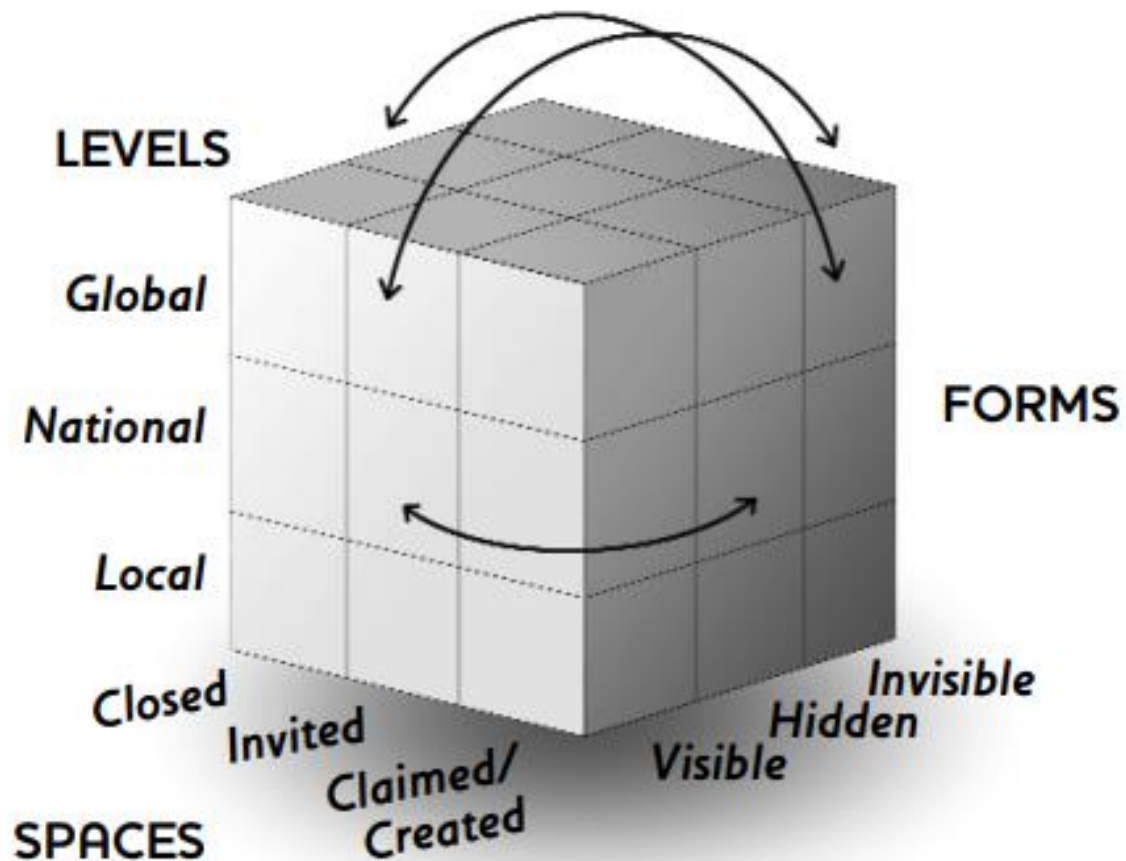


Figure 1. The 'power cube': The levels, spaces, and forms of power (image from Gaventa, 2006)

Gaventa's levels of power are important to consider globally, nationally, and locally. Political developments in the UK over the last few decades have seen shifts between these, at least in theory. This is sometimes referred to as a dispersal of power or a shift from government to governance. This included residents having a greater say in local service delivery.

Local government became less powerful under the Conservative governments between 1979-1997, for example with the outsourcing of services and the council tax cap (introduced in the Rates Act 1984). Under the 'New' Labour governments of 1997-2010, which used the rhetoric of 'empowerment' frequently, there was a greater emphasis on partnerships at a local level. There was also devolution to Scotland and Wales, with new governing bodies and assemblies formed in the late 1990s, adding a regional component to the local level of power. Then later in the New Labour period came what the then-Minister of State for Communities and Local Government David Miliband described as 'double devolution':

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"I call it "double devolution" – not just devolution that takes power from central government and gives it to local government, but power that goes from local government down to local people, providing a critical role for individual and neighbourhoods, often through the voluntary sector." (Weaver, M. 2006)

Finally, under the Coalition from 2010-2015 and the Conservative governments from 2015 to present, there has been an emphasis on localism, encapsulated initially in the Localism Act (2011).

As well as these supposed shifts in power, there have also been specific empowerment initiatives. These included the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) initiated by the Conservatives (which ran from 1994 to 2001) and the New Deal for Communities under New Labour (which ran from 1998 to 2010). It is often viewed that throughout these different periods, despite the rhetoric, many of these so-called empowerment initiatives were ultimately top-down. Taylor was critical about the SRB and other initiatives of the 1990s, for instance, but also found that some of the subsequent New Labour programmes did not resolve these issues. For example, communities could find themselves at a disadvantage because they did not have financial assets to contribute to a partnership, rather they were a 'problem' that needed to be solved. Moreover, the very space of decision-making was designed at the centre and had the *culture* of the centre that came with this:

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"...coming from the centre, as they do, they enshrine pre-existing cultures of programme design and design-making, rather than taking the risk that communities, given time and resources, may do things differently. They may not be "written in stone" as far as the power-holders are concerned, but they are given considerable weight by the accountable bodies understandably reluctant to take risks with such a high-profile initiative." (Taylor, M. 2000, p.124)

Many of Taylor's concerns were borne out. In 2007 she concluded that while the various New Labour empowerment initiatives had created new spaces for engagement, this did not result in a genuine shift of power to communities:

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"The shift from government to governance in recent years has created significant new opportunities for people from disadvantaged communities to participate in the decisions that affect them. However, the weight of evidence over the years suggests that these communities have remained on the margins in partnerships and other initiatives." (Taylor, M, 2007, p.297)

While such schemes could help communities become 'active subjects', enabling them to shape prevailing discourses, ultimately:

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"New governance spaces are still inscribed with a state agenda, with responsibilities pushed down to communities and individuals at the

same time that control is retained at the centre, through the imposition and internalisation of performance cultures that require 'appropriate' behaviour." (Weaver, M, 2007, p.314)

The issue of 'co-option' and its potential pitfalls are returned to in part two in relation to Big Local partnerships.

Under the coalition, the Localism Act (2011) sought to "end the era of top-down government [through a] fundamental shift of power from Westminster to people" (Locality, 2018, p. 12). But again, there is a gap between the rhetoric of a shift in power and the reality, with community empowerment organisation Locality asserting:

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"Seven years on from the passage of the Localism Act, the fundamental shift in power away from Westminster promised by the legislation has not been achieved." (Locality, 2018, p.12)

## Summary: Power in communities

The literature examined outlines challenges that emerge when considering power in relation to communities. Should larger, structural power be considered, or should it just be about the 'art of possible'? When communities are involved in decision-making how much say do they truly have, or is the fundamental agenda set by the centre/power holders? And if communities do work too closely with existing power structures, is there a danger of co-option? The UK has a recent history of successive governments stating a desire to shift power downwards, but with the reality not matching the rhetoric.

## Power in Big Local

The second part of this literature review looks at issues related to power that have arisen in Big Local areas, as identified in the main evaluations so far. There are times when the term is used conceptually and others when it is used more generically, in a more everyday usage. Some of the latter examples relate to tensions in the Big Local areas, both in terms of conflict with existing power structures and within Big Local partnerships being labelled as 'power struggles'. There are also relevant issues in terms of the emerging findings about positive change and outcomes relating to the programme, with some signs of a potential power shift.

## How the design of Big Local relates to power

Big Local sought to build on the learning of previous regeneration and community development initiatives, some of which were identified in part one. Communities were to have control, opposed to just an input, by having the ultimate say in how the money is spent. Residents would also have resources (in the shape of the £1.15 million and various support), something that was not the case in previous empowerment initiatives, or certainly not on this scale. The importance of this was echoed in a recent report which suggested that one of the enablers for community power, as well as spaces for participation, was some form of economic power:

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“Having control over economic resources at a local level, including through community ownership of assets and devolved budgets, and having the means to address local priorities and find community-led solutions is critical to community power.” (Locality, 2018, p. 15)

The light-touch nature of the Big Local programme also means that the partnerships would not have to formalise in order to fulfil bureaucratic requirements, something that Taylor identified as being problematic in certain previous empowerment initiatives (Taylor, M. 2000).

## Power within partnerships

Big Local invests areas with power by enabling them to decide how to spend their £1.15 million endowment. This power tends to reside in the partnership. Individual members of the partnership therefore have power, but this is not always evenly distributed.

In various Big Local evaluation reports the term ‘power’, particularly in terms of power struggles, was used about partnerships. For example, in the early years’ evaluation:

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“[There are] factions of residents with power who are excluding other residents from having a genuine influence on decision-making” (NCVO et al, 2014, p. 68).

“Issues of people and power have perhaps had the most impact of steering groups and partnerships – personal issues, personality clashes, power struggles, faction between groups, difficulties getting people involved or keeping them involved.” (NCVO et al, 2014, p. 147)

There were similar findings in the *Our Bigger Story* evaluation, which found that these conflicts could increase as areas went into delivery: “Many of the tensions identified are becoming stronger as partnerships are responsible for more and more plan delivery” (McCabe et al, 2017, p. 55). But echoing a theme explored in part one, including in *Empowered Communities in the 2020s*, it appears that a reflection on where power resides matters, both in terms of influence and in engaging the wider community.

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“What is, however, evident from the data on the partnership working, structures and processes is that residents are reflecting on the key issues of power, influence, equity and control in decision making and engagement with the wider community.” (McCabe, A. et al, 2017, p. 55)

The resident-led nature of the programme also means that tensions differ from previous initiatives, with conflicts between residents being more frequent than with external agencies.

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“Whilst there is a history of tensions and conflicts in earlier area-based initiatives, this has often been between residents and paid officials. As a resident-led initiative, tensions and conflict in Big Local areas can be qualitatively different. Conflict is not between local people and some remote authority, but, potentially, between near neighbours.” (McCabe, A. et al, 2017, p. 95)

However, it should be noted that while the literature can emphasise conflict as a lens through which to understand the ways in which issues of power and control are resolved at a local level, recent Local Trust research on the Area Assessment Tool suggests that at any one time those Big Local areas experiencing conflict represent a small minority compared to the whole group (currently just under 30 areas). Furthermore, it should not be assumed that where conflict takes place this is always a result of struggles over power and control, as opposed to personality conflicts and or other factors (Local Trust, 2018).

## Relationships between Big Local partnerships and existing local power holders

With Big Local attempting substantial empowerment of communities, in terms of putting residents in control of money in their area, this was perhaps bound to lead in some instances to tensions with existing local power holders, such as local authorities. The early years evaluation found there could be “tensions linked to ownership, power between organisations or parts of a community, challenges of working with different groups” (NCVO et al, 2014, p. 114), with instances of “organisations not supportive of the resident-led ethos or otherwise unhelpful” (p. 147). Ultimately it was seen as desirable that there are “relationships that are empowering and not overpowering...and their values also matter” – they should “really get it, the ethos of Big Local” (p. 132).

Yet *Our Bigger Story* did find that partnerships had often become so called traditional structures. Whilst this made partnerships more hierarchal, it appeared to give them more legitimacy with power holders.

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“...there is a downside to this in that they are not always in the most open and participatory arrangements. However, there is evidence that these structures are often welcomed by other service providers and power holders.” (McCabe, A. et al, 2017, p. 77)

## How important is it that partnerships tap into broader networks?

In theory partnerships could potentially deliver the Big Local programme without engaging existing power structures, such as local authorities, and there might be good reason for this, such as a dysfunctional or uninterested local authority. But there seems to be a consensus in the research that engaging with broader local power structures is vital.

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“Partnerships can be extremely inward looking – focusing on their immediate area. Such a hyper-local approach can be valued by residents in that services are delivered at the very local level. However, these are the partnerships which tend to be struggling to see “the bigger picture” of the broader context in which Big Local is operating and may



lack influence with those in power who make decisions about their community.” (McCabe, A. et al, 2017, p. 85)

Yet *Our Bigger Story* also asks whether too much is expected of residents in terms of increasing influence and power:

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“The learning necessary to manage a one million [pounds] community-based programme can be very demanding and technical... And it also raises questions around whether Local Trust’s aspirations that Big Local partnerships will broaden activism in their areas and share decision-making powers beyond their formal and informal structures, are too big an ‘ask’ of residents.” (McCabe, A. et al, 2017, p. 95)

They felt this “big ask” has meant that partnerships have tended to play it safe, both in terms of their governance structures and the interventions they adopt (McCabe et al, 2017, p. 95).

## The role of the worker

Workers (employed as community development workers with varying degrees of experience) are an increasingly common feature of Big Local. The first tranche of data from the Area Assessment Tool showed that 136 out of 150 areas have a worker, with on average 1.1 full-time equivalent workers, and in 127 areas there is at least one worker doing some form of community development work. The implications of this in terms of power are not fully clear. For example, *Our Bigger Story*, whilst asserting that workers tended to subscribe to the Big Local ethos, assert that there could be other repercussions. For example, residents not building the networks with power holders that they might have done without a worker being involved.

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“It is inevitable however, that particularly where the worker is full-time, they will build up relationships with other decision makers and power holders, interactions that residents may not have the opportunity to develop. This does raise questions about sustainable networks and influence in the future.” (McCabe, A. et al, 2017, p. 60)

This point may not be limited to workers. If only a few people on partnerships are developing key networks, does this have implications for the sustainability of the relationships? For instance, what happens to the networks if the well-connected individual leaves the partnership suddenly?

## Examples of different types of possible power shifts occurring in Big Local

The extent to which there has been a shift in power in Big Local areas so far is not clear. The *Communities in Control* study has identified different participative spaces that have emerged and find they have the “potential to support increased collective control/empowerment” (SPHR, 2018). Accompanying this are emerging different types of power in Big Local, based on a similar framework to Gaventa outlined in part one. They have developed ‘markers’ of positive change in collective control, centred on three dimensions of power (SPHR, 2018):



## Dimensions of power (*Communities in Control* study)

### **Power *within***

- Gaining confidence, skills, and knowledge
- Developing sense of group-efficacy, collective identity, common cause

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“What we achieved was... there were a lot of doubters, but we did it. And now... we don't have/ the doubters are gone”

### **Power *to***

- Open up spaces for decision making & action
- Resist exercise of 'power over' by others

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“A powerful voice that could prompt action from the council”

### **Power *with***

- Developing links with and/or organising action alongside other organisations

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“We need everybody on board...help from the council... the traders and we can offer them things as well”

Similarly, *Our Bigger Story* had found partnerships exerting influence, which they categorise in two ways:

- Being there and being active: In these examples there is an importance to the money – the £1.15 million allocated to each Big Local area – creating the sense that Big Local partnerships are 'serious players' and have a credibility within the community
- A conscious effort to influence what happens in an area: This is through an increased and collective understanding of how the local political and policy context works and using this knowledge to make change in the local area and/or lobby those seen to have power. Here, the money is largely irrelevant though there are examples where being seen as managing the money efficiently and effectively enhances their legitimacy with power holders (SPHR, 2018)

## Summary: Power in Big Local

The design of the Big Local programme sought to address many of the criticisms of previous empowerment programmes. This was by: providing communities with a sizeable asset (£1.15 million plus support); enabling communities to decide how the money was spent; and ensuring that the programme is light touch. However, there are examples of power conflicts both within existing power structures and within partnerships. Yet both *Communities in Control* and *Our Bigger Story* identify instances of residents having greater control and being able to influence existing power structures.

The tensions between inclusive broader entities and more formal narrower structures seem to be a recurring issue in this review both of previous initiatives and in Big Local partnerships. In particular, there were reflections in *Our Bigger Story* that partnerships might be more formal than originally envisaged. This can have the effect of them gaining greater creditability with some local power holders, albeit possibly at the expense of being a more inclusive partnership.

## Conclusion

There are some recurring debates about communities and power which are as relevant to the Big Local programme as they were to previous initiatives. Research on Big Local so far has shown that Big Local areas have had to deal with these perennial challenges. The research also shows there are some key areas where Big Local is making headway in a shift of power to communities.

On the basis of the literature explored for this review, any further research on power in Big Local needs to consider the following two overarching questions:

- Whether Big Local provides power to residents: Is there any power residing with residents that they did not possess before? This could derive from having a say in how the £1.15 million is spent
- Whether there is genuinely a transfer of power in Big Local: To put it simply, if Big Local helps to provide power to local residents (see above), has anyone lost this power? This would represent a shift in power, not just simply new power

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