1. Executive summary

This report is about the practice of decision making in a resident-led, place-based programme. It explores the operation of power within decision making, how decisions are made, by and with whom and in what contexts. It considers how particular ideas gather appeal, how some voices are heard more than others, and how beliefs in 'the right way' to make decisions matter and can have unintended consequences of limiting agendas and imagination. Finally, it identifies ways to strengthen decision making in a community-led programme by developing new forms of participation and sharing power among all sections of the community.

The research is based on Big Local. Big Local is a resident-led funding programme providing groups of people in 150 areas in England with £1.15m each to spend across 10 to 15 years to create lasting change in their neighbourhoods. A key goal of the Big Local programme is for communities to build confidence and capacity for the longer term (Local Trust, 2019). In Big Local areas, resident-led partnerships[1] play a crucial role in decision making and guide the overall direction of Big Local in their area.

The research was conducted by the Centre for Ethnographic Research at the University of Kent through interviews and online observation (virtual ethnography). We present our findings in five main areas: culture, power and processes; partnership rules and agendas; membership, recruitment and diversity; voice, power and inequality; and spaces of communication and decision making. Our research revealed how power resides in different phases of the processes involved in decision making as well as in the final outcome. We also found that although most Big Local partnerships aim to include all community members, barriers remain based on protected characteristics such as race and gender that affect individuals' participation in Big Local partnerships. We carried out the research during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the move to online decision making has disrupted partnerships' internal working cultures and created new opportunities for inclusivity. We conclude that power operates in different ways across decision making processes and that this is influenced by the space decisions take place in, whose voice is heard and why, and how rules are made and interpreted.

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[1] Partnerships must be made up of at least eight people, of which over half must be residents. They are sometimes known as decision-making boards or steering groups.

What counts as a decision? Culture, power and processes

Decisions are more than a moment in time; they are a process that often extends over time and includes hidden and overt aspects. Power is often embedded in the unrecognised parts of this process. Decision making is a process and not a singular moment. Yet, we tend to think about decisions regarding the final moments in which they are settled rather than recognising the 'micro decisions' that carve paths towards them. The process, in turn, is influenced by the surrounding organisational culture and how members of a partnership think about decisions, informal conversations and other actions involved in decision making. The way that power operates, therefore, is not always open and visible.

- Many of the decisions we take are hidden or not recognised as decisions. Step by step processes of decision making ultimately guide and contribute to understanding the topic of a decision and, therefore, also influence larger decisions.

- Most of our research participants considered the 'big' and 'final' decision determined by a formal vote as the most notable or essential part of the process. However, the smaller discussions via messages, informal chats or phone calls were mentioned more fleetingly and often understood as unimportant or unrelated to the decision making process.

- We want to draw attention to how unseen decisions can shape the possible outcomes and how power operates invisibly in the 'in-between' spaces.

Partnership rules and agendas

Our research explored the formal ways of organising action within partnerships. We found that although Local Trust does not give many rules for partnerships to follow, partnerships nonetheless develop structures which become embedded in their practice and activity.

- Rules and regulations are made mainly by members and workers in partnerships and tend not to be questioned or changed over time. There is little explicit discussion of rules and policies in the data we collected from Big Local areas. The taken-for-granted acceptance of rules and formal structures we have uncovered may unnecessarily constrain the work of Big Local partnerships. In contrast, clear plans and objectives are useful reference points to guide activity and assess decisions.

- Uncertainty about what a partnership's rules are and what they mean sometimes causes confusion in meetings. This may have a 'chilling effect' that prevents people from participating, which inhibits the development of some ideas.

- Meeting agendas are open in principle, but through what is seen as the norm or because of differing levels of engagement, they tend to be created by chairs and workers. Agendas shape which decisions might be made, and as a taken-for-granted practice, they can also conceal power relations. In practice, the chair or workers often have considerable control over how agendas are presented and the space given to different topics.

- Free-flowing discussion or free space within meetings can stimulate broader conversation and ideas.

- It is important to consider the pace of meetings. The way meetings are run, for instance, by speeding things along or slowing them down, has implications for participation.

Membership, recruitment and diversity

Protected characteristics of partnership members, such as their race, gender or class, and how these 'intersect' to create layers of disadvantage, must be considered to ensure inclusivity and participation. We have seen how partnerships make significant efforts to be inclusive and encourage participation from different parts of the community. However, hidden discrimination still occurs, and there are barriers to participation within partnerships, even if some of these may be unintentional and reflect the obstacles that exist in broader society. For example, who is recruited, and therefore represented, on membership boards of the partnerships is in part determined by those who already hold power within the community.

- Diversity is both perceived as positive and a challenge for partnerships. Issues of diversity and inclusion that exist in broader society are prevalent also in the Big Local partnerships.

- Race/ethnicity is the terrain of greatest challenge: it is an example of 'wilful blindness' , a way to avoid uncomfortable information about others.

- Several characteristics remain under-addressed or acknowledged, including class, gender, different types of disability and how these impact the accessibility of meetings and the possibilities of participation.

- Recruitment can end up relying on members' social networks, which prevents diversification.

- Mindful focus and reflection on issues that might prevent diversity help partnerships to be more inclusive and allows more voices to be heard.

## Participation in decision making: Voice, power and inequality

At times, dominant voices exercise power over others in meeting situations. At times, people show deference and respect to those with dominant voices and appreciate how chairs, for instance, run meetings and get things done. However, there is also frustration and recognition that this contributes to inequalities in participation. People sometimes feel silenced, and their views are not always welcomed, notably when they are not expressed in what is deemed 'the right way'. Yet, there are also numerous examples of creative and original gestures of inclusivity that make a tangible difference to how participants feel – and, we imagine, a difference to outcomes of decision making.

- Dominant voices are useful for running meetings and keeping discussion focused. This style may be effective for making things happen but sometimes does so at the cost of the participation and inclusion of others.

- 'Silencing' mechanisms include meeting styles and formats. For example, always adhering to the same agenda may discourage free conversation and inhibit ideas.

- Ways to help all members participate include creating space for listening at regular points during meetings or preparing materials in an accessible way.

Spaces of communication and decision making

We examined what or who motivates and inspires active involvement and how this happens informally and online. Understanding informal power structures and organisational culture is key to understanding how groups work when making both small decisions and wide structural ones. Some partnerships use group messaging or social media for communication about decisions, and some communicate mostly by email. In a pre-pandemic time, such decisions were often taken over a cup of tea, which has implications for the atmosphere, culture and functioning of each group. In an increasingly digital world, understanding the reasons for digital inclusion in decision making is vital. Digital communication has advantages and disadvantages concerning participation and decision making and, therefore, also the operation of power.

- Digital poverty and digital exclusion affect partnerships, both for in-group and out-group communications.

- It is important to consider the space and atmosphere of decision making, both face-to-face and online. Allowing time for humour and informal conversation can boost participation and shape cultural identity.

- Partnerships are navigating participation in virtual meetings via Zoom, with significant obstacles. Most have found that Zoom has a way of making meetings more effective, but this also leaves less time for informal and unstructured conversations.

- Different mediums of communication hold varying degrees of legitimacy for decision making. While some groups find email a professional way of taking decisions, others consider Zoom meetings more reliable.
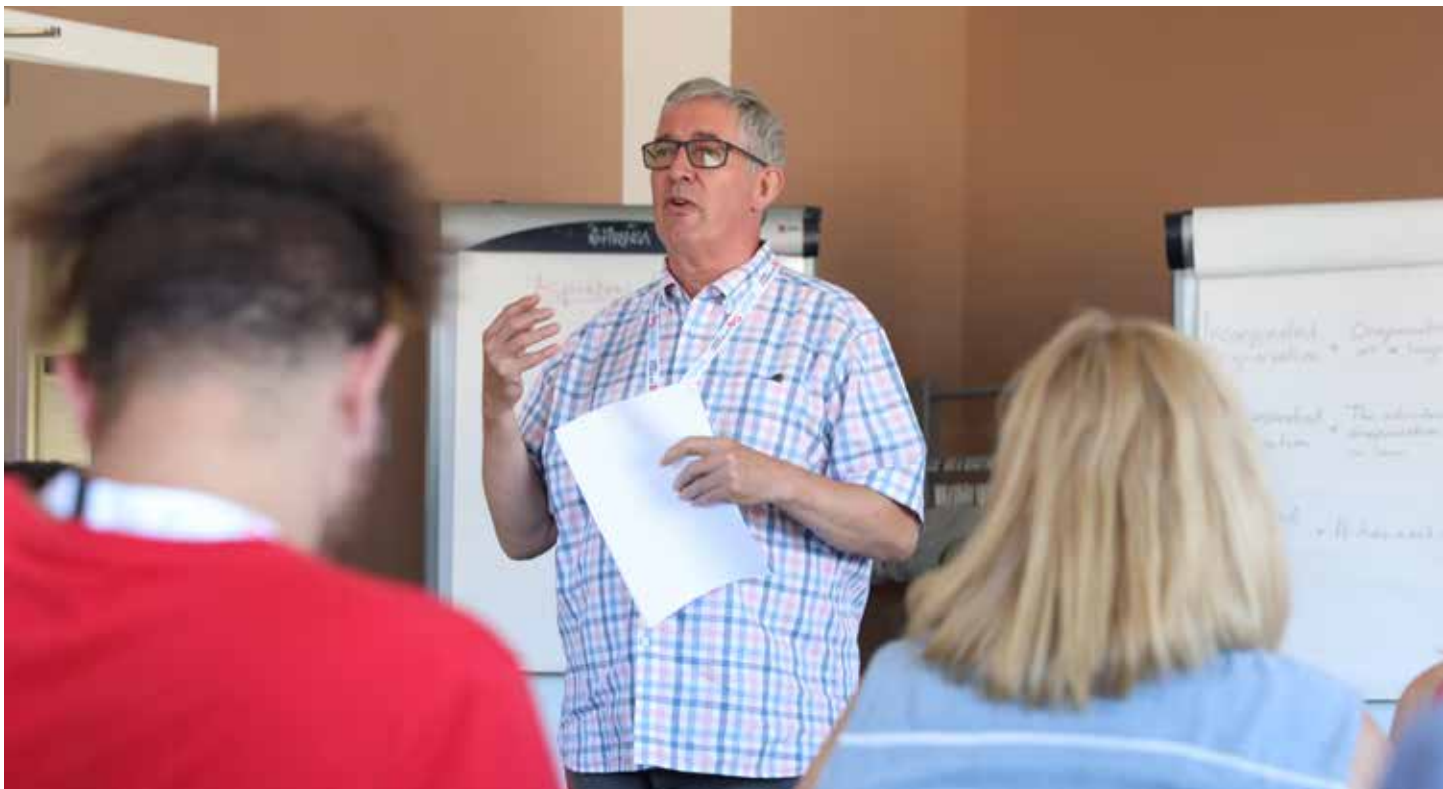
James O Jenkins

Conclusions and recommendations

The findings of our research project lead to a call for reflection: to acknowledge power differences, then share that awareness with others, in the process of meetings or in the course of decision making. If power is not a static thing, it follows that the power configuration of any meeting (or decision making process) can be transformed. Practising power differently is both a goal and a process. It offers an opportunity to enhance forms and practices of participation and inclusivity in decision making – and celebrate the resident-led model that Big Local has so brilliantly developed.

We summarise our key recommendations here:

Understanding power

When we reflect, we notice that power works in complicated ways. Many parts of how it works are hidden and often unintentional. By having a better understanding of power, and an awareness of it, we can also challenge how it works.

Cooperation

The Big Local ethos is already to cooperate and to work and make a positive difference together. Inspiring those who might find it difficult to have a voice and allowing different types of spaces is essential. Consider trying something new, moving away from agendas, having informal meetings now and then, and finding new ways of working together.

Self-reflection

One way of doing this is through self-reflection. If you are a resident member, worker or chair who often takes the lead on decision making, take some time to reflect on how things work in your partnership. Can meetings happen in different ways? Can someone else take a turn at chairing the meeting? Having a conversation with those members who are quieter could be helpful.

Awareness

By doing some self-reflection, we also have a better chance of tackling inequalities, for example, those related to ethnicity, race, age, disability, gender and class. It is important to acknowledge and reflect how these protected characteristics impact decision making in open conversation. Members from minority positions often wait to hear this acknowledgement, which, in turn, invites and empowers them to share and participate.

Minimising formality

The form of regular meetings can also discourage some members from speaking. Meeting structures can be relaxed by providing opportunities for free talking through breakout groups or informal cups of tea and chats. It is easier for some members to share their viewpoint in small-group conversation. These could be separate, informal meetings as well as the usual meetings or a casual section of otherwise formal meetings.

Taking small steps

The participants in this research shared or proposed various small steps that support participation. These include rotating meeting chairs, actively supporting the development of agenda items, text and audio-visual summaries of meeting documents, induction and buddying schemes, payments for childcare, sensitivity about meeting locations, coffee Wednesdays and good food! (See Recommendations for the complete list.)