Building community leadership

Learning from the Community Leadership Academy

August 2023

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

Local Trust

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About this report
Building community leadership is the final report from a three-year evaluation on the Community Leadership Academy (CLA), which provides support for residents leading change in their local area. Created by Local Trust, the CLA was developed by Koreo, the Young Foundation and Northern Soul and has supported two cohorts of participants to date, with a third currently being recruited. Divided into three parts, this report explores learning from the programme's design and delivery, the impact of the programme on participants, Big Local partnerships and wider communities, and conclusions for other community leadership initiatives to take away. The findings shared and explored in this evaluation report are being applied to the current cohort of the CLA.

Caption: A flag-making workshop at Boston Central Big Local

Credit: Zute Lightfoot

COMMUNITY FUND

Terminology

Big Local: Big Local is a resident-led funding programme, providing communities in 150 areas in England with £1.15m each to spend across 10-15 years, to create lasting change in their neighbourhoods.

Big Local area(s): Big Local areas are neighbourhoods selected by the

National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF) to receive £1.15m. Local Trust is working with 150 Big Local areas

Big Local partnership(s): A Big Local partnership is a group comprising at least eight people ('members') that guide the overall direction of a Big Local area.

Area advisors: Area advisors provide specialist skills, guidance, challenge and support to Big Local areas.

Area coordinators: Area coordinators provide general guidance, advice and challenge to Big Local areas.

Big Local legacy: The lasting impact that the Big Local programme has had on communities and resident-led change

Big Local partnership chair: The person who is leading a Big Local partnership, although not all Big Local areas have one.

Big Local plan: The document that every Big Local area writes for themselves, their community and Local Trust. A guide and action plan that their partnership can follow, share and use to get others involved.

Big Local reps: Individuals appointed by Local Trust to offer tailored support to a Big Local area. The rep model was replaced with the area coordinator and area advisor model in 2022/3.

Big Local worker: Paid individuals working for Big Local partnerships, opposed to those who volunteer their time.

Creative Civic Change: An experimental funding programme supporting 15 communities across England to shape, lead and commission arts and creative interventions to make positive social change where they lived.

Locally trusted organisation (LTO): A locally trusted organisation is the organisation chosen by people in a Big Local area or the partnership to administer and account for funding, and/or deliver activities or services on behalf of a partnership. Areas might work with more than one locally trusted organisation depending on their Big Local plan and the skills and resources required.

Partner organisations: Partner organisations were identified to recruit participants from outside Big Local partnerships. These organisations lead positive change in a range of sectors such as housing, charitable trust foundations and capacity building programmes.

Contents

Introduction

Local Trust enables residents in 150 Big Local areas to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live. Local Trust's Community Leadership Academy (CLA) provides support for local residents leading change in their local area, helping them to develop and share skills and knowledge that will benefit the whole community. In October 2019, Just Ideas and the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) were appointed by Local Trust as the evaluation and learning partners for the CLA.

Aims of the CLA

1. To identify and support established and emerging leaders in the Big Local programme and enhance the delivery of the Big Local programme in their areas.

2. To leave a legacy of more confident and better networked community leaders.

3. To develop our and others' understanding of community leadership, its importance in thriving communities and how it can be better supported in future.

About the Community Leadership Academy

Created by Local Trust, the CLA was developed by Koreo, the Young Foundation and Northern Soul. The programme uses various structured and informal activities to connect participants with their peers while building their skills and knowledge in leading positive change as volunteers in their communities.

Activities included:

- **Coaching:** a form of one-to-one support between a participant and leadership coach over a series of confidential conversations.

- **Group learning workshops:** workshops run with cohorts to learn about community leadership, exploring questions and common issues

- **Masterclasses:** sessions focused on hearing from people and experts with important perspectives

- **Residentials:** structured sessions over a longer period of time which bring participants together to network and talk about community leadership

- **Informal peer support and networking:** building in open and casual opportunities for participants to build connections with their peers.

The CLA started with a pilot phase in September 2019. In 2020, due to COVID-19, the programme shifted online instead of the planned in-person format. It is now primarily online with complementary in-person residentials. So far, there have been four rounds of delivery.

The pilot phase

This was for a small cohort, primarily involving the coaching element of the programme - September-December 2019.

Wave 1

This was for a cohort of 44 participants from 35 Big Local areas - July 2020-October 2021

Wave 2

This was for a cohort of 80 participants from 46 Big Local areas, three Creative Civic Change areas, and five external partner organisations. In this wave, partner organisations could nominate community leaders. Participants could also sign up alongside other members from their partner organisation or Big Local partnership. The hope was that joining as a 'support group' would give participants support within the programme and help to embed learning from the CLA into their partnerships or organisations - July 2021-October 2022.

Wave 3

This will start with an in-person event. Recruitment was underway at the time of producing this report - Spring 2023-spring 2024

Our approach to evaluation and learning

Our approach to evaluation and learning aimed to:

- generate developmental learning to inform programme design
- understand what differences the CLA makes to individuals, Big Local areas and their wider communities
- explore how the CLA approach might develop beyond the Big Local programme.

We used participatory methods to create opportunities for participants to share their experiences and views of the programme as it developed. The learning was shared at regular workshops with Local Trust and the CLA delivery partners to help shape the programme.

The findings in this report are based on the following evaluation activities conducted between November 2019 and October 2022 (see Appendix for further details):

- **A review of academic, policy and practice literature**

- **88 interviews** with 25 CLA participants; nine coaches; five members of the delivery team; four Local Trust staff; three partner organisations and external stakeholders

- **Observation** of 28 online programme sessions, recruitment selection meetings, and graduation/wrap up sessions

- **Two focus groups:**

    1. Nine external stakeholders delivering community leadership programmes

    2. Three Big Local reps who had partnership members involved in the CLA

- **Four learning sessions with participants at CLA events**

- **Four case studies** of Big Local partnerships. These included observing partnership meetings as well as 34 interviews and workshops

- **Three online surveys of CLA participants** which received a total of 54 responses

- **Ongoing secondary analysis of CLA programme data**

- **Eight learning workshops**

We produced a range of outputs throughout our work to share learning which included slide decks, blogs, interim reports and summaries for participants. A short co-produced film complements these written outputs, documenting the story of one individual's involvement in the CLA programme.

This report

The report is in three parts:

- **Part one:** Learning from programme design and delivery

- **Part two:** The impact of the programme on individual CLA participants, their Big Local partnerships, and their wider community.

- **Part three:** Conclusions and lessons for other community leadership initiatives

We use anonymised quotations from interviews and anonymised vignettes from case studies to illustrate the findings.

Part one: Programme design and delivery

In this section, we share learning about what worked and where there were challenges in the programme's design and delivery. This part of the report focuses on the technical elements of the programme and should be read alongside the later sections on impact and change. We look at recruitment and engagement; format of delivery; programme content; and creating enabling and supportive spaces.

Key insights

The CLA recruitment process enabled participation from people who did not identify as leaders. It was refined over the lifetime of the programme to increase accessibility.

The programme successfully pivoted online at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. A mix of online and in-person sessions enabled the programme to engage and support community volunteers with busy and complex lives.

Flexible delivery methods met the needs of participants as they were able to listen and take feedback on board. It also created a positive and safe space for participants to engage with the programme online and in person.

In general, participants from partner organisations found the programme less relevant and did not benefit from the infrastructure and connection provided by the Big Local programme for Big Local volunteers.

Extending recruitment to 'groups' (more than one participant from the same Big Local area), with the aim of building peer support at a local level, needs further development. The flexibility of the programme meant that people from groups did not need to attend the same sessions and participants' individual needs meant that they often experienced the programme separately.

Programme content that explained leadership styles and overcoming imposter syndrome was highly valued by participants, along with the direct experience of community leadership shared by contributors and previous participants of the CLA.

Recruitment and engagement

The CLA programme received 219 applications in total, which included 102 applications in Wave 1 and 117 in Wave 2. Approximately 43 per cent of applications for Wave 1 and 71 per cent of applications for Wave 2 were successful. The increase in successful applications was due to more places being available. In Wave 2, 22 individuals and groups from community groups outside of the Big Local programme were recruited through five partner organisations.

Initially the CLA recruitment process included:

- participants being nominated by their Big Local area or partner organisation, or self-nomination[1]

- shortlisting and selection by Local Trust and the delivery team

- a follow-up call with successful and unsuccessful applicants to give feedback and information about the next steps.

Evaluation data in Wave 1 suggested a need for participants to receive more information before starting the programme. In response, the CLA delivery partners engaged with Wave 2 participants before the course, speaking at regional Big Local meetings, holding onboarding calls, and providing an overview of the programme and titles of the course sessions. This was received positively by Wave 2 participants and improved understanding of the aims and approach of the CLA for this cohort.

Overall, CLA participants found the recruitment process clear and supportive. The option for both external and self-nomination was an important element. Nomination by people outside of Big Local partnerships enabled participation from individuals that did not consider themselves leaders and would not have otherwise applied. Self-nomination was valuable particularly for those from partnerships experiencing conflict. CLA delivery partners supported some individuals with writing applications by calling potential applicants, offering guidance and using information from calls as a verbal application.

It's fair to conclude that the programme successfully reached emerging leaders as many participants across Waves 1 and 2 identified in this way. This suggests that the CLA's nomination and application process managed to reach individuals with a range of experience. It reached beyond individuals already in established leadership roles (e.g. people who have been making a difference in their communities for an extensive period of time without a formal title), as well as those in informal leadership roles (e.g. the Chair of the Big Local partnership), who may not have thought to apply.

The following factors helped the CLA to reach and engage emerging leaders:

- Where Big Local reps raised local awareness of the CLA, participants trusted their steer to take part. Subsequently, the nomination process helped boost participants' confidence in themselves.

- Self-nomination provided a way for participants from partnerships with leadership difficulties or going through a period of transition to apply.

- Applicants were offered support to strengthen their applications through phone call follow-ups from the delivery team, which also helped to build their confidence and skills. For example, one participant felt that they developed their skills to write application forms (to apply for courses independent of the CLA).

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[1] Self-nominating means that a participant expressed interest or put themselves forward for the CLA, though most often this was with the agreement or backing of the Big Local partnership.

The main motivation for participants applying to the CLA was a desire to improve a range of their leadership skills, such as conflict resolution and effective community engagement:

> ❝ **I don't like confrontational situations. I don't have the speed that is needed. When I heard about the academy, I thought it might be a good way to improve that and do better and be more of a leader … to better the way that I do it already."**

(CLA participant)

Participants were also keen to learn about 'sustainable leadership', exploring how leadership can be passed on (succession) and how to create a legacy when the Big Local programme ends.

During Wave 1 of the programme, the CLA delivery partners monitored participant engagement using a 'RAG'[2] system. This data showed that 32 of the 44 participants (73 per cent) were very engaged, seven (16 per cent) were not engaged and two (five per cent) dropped out. While this gave some indication of engagement, the RAG system didn't capture the whole picture so it was abandoned during Wave 2. It didn't account for participants who engaged in the programme by watching recorded content rather than attending 'live' sessions. In Wave 2, 28 of the 80 participants (35 per cent) did not finish the programme, of which nine came from partner organisations. This includes 17 who formally dropped out of the programme, and 11 who did not engage in any part of the programme.

In both Waves 1 and 2, we found that a more engaged group attended all sessions, while others dipped in and out of the programme depending on their other commitments, Zoom fatigue and their different learning needs.

> ❝ **Due to the pandemic circumstances, the whole structure of the CLA was rejigged to be carried out totally via Zoom. With our personal and volunteer/ professional lives being lived through video meetings, it was all a bit too much for me. [It was] difficult to maintain concentration, to understand or take in slides or PowerPoint presentations and not being able to spontaneously ask a question seriously diminished the experience."**

(CLA participant)

Many participants had busy or complex lives, juggling full-time jobs, caring responsibilities, community work or health conditions and found the time commitment of the CLA programme challenging.

> ❝ **Sometimes work and childcare gets in the way. I could not attend all the sessions for this reason."**

(CLA participant)

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[2] Red Amber Green rating system to monitor engagement.

Additional reasons for individuals dropping out or losing motivation included issues with the language used in the course content, such as overly theoretical concepts or the term 'community leadership' (see page 27); the emotional demand of doing deep reflective work (see section on improved awareness of self and others on page 14); and the disconnect experienced by participants from partner organisations where the content and discussions felt too focused on the Big Local context. The CLA adapted in response to these needs and learning from Wave 1 by offering refresher sessions, follow-up calls and more flexibility around the dates and times of the sessions. This responsiveness helped make the CLA delivery partners approachable and set the tone for a programme that required participants to be vulnerable and honest.

Participants were also keen to understand the expectations of engagement ahead of the start of the programme, especially participants who were balancing other commitments, like work and childcare. This was particularly the case for participants from partner organisations who felt that communication and clarity about the CLA could be further improved. In response to this, the CLA delivery partners have developed a resource hub that collates programme content and resources. Wave 2 participants positively welcomed this development.

Delivery format

The programme was initially designed to be delivered in person but shifted online during COVID-19. Overall, participants thought the delivery partners had done *"a great job in difficult circumstances"* according to one participant. Although both participants and the delivery team expressed a preference for in-person delivery, they equally appreciated the accessibility and convenience that online delivery offered:

I don't think we could have done it without Zoom – given the geographic spread. Zoom has proved itself."

(CLA participant)

Online delivery was more accessible for some participants, especially those with caring or work commitments, or who have anxieties about group settings. The programme aimed to be flexible to different needs, for example by giving access to recordings of the sessions. In turn, this helped with participation and inclusion.

We are constantly tweaking, listening to feedback and shaping the content around the people that are involved."

(Delivery partner)

The course leaders, providers and evaluation delivery partners – [it was] pure witchcraft from them in herding us cats! Also, the way in which the course evolved and was very proactive in changing and tweaking elements after listening to member concerns."

(CLA participant)

Once COVID-19 restrictions eased, in-person delivery at CLA residentials in both Wave 1 and Wave 2 enabled more nuanced conversations and the ability to develop relationships. Participants valued informal interactions that in-person delivery provides, like talking with peers during breaks and getting to know people during social time:

> **[It] was amazing! Felt I could have spent a week there. Fun as well. Getting ideas and inspiration for your community. Not an institutionalised meeting."**
>
> (CLA participant)

The success of the in-person residentials was based on the provision of informative session content alongside rich in-person discussions and a chance to deepen relationships during the online sessions:

> **That community aspect culminating in the residential. We came together in those two days."**
>
> (CLA participant)

> **I loved the residential, something I would not normally attend but the leadership delivery partners were all so supportive I took a chance and it really helped me to understand I can lead, and that I am a leader, not an imposter. I can make a valid contribution."**
>
> (CLA participant)

A key learning from participants is the need to provide a range of ways to deliver a programme and engage with individuals who have busy and complex lives. On balance, a mix of online and in-person sessions appears to have achieved this successfully.

Programme content

The CLA focuses on developing participants' personal and leadership skills in the hope that this will benefit their partnership or community group by changing how they interact in this setting, that they will share this learning with their Big Local partnerships, and that the experience will have a positive impact on their work in the wider community. The three stages of programme content reflect this: 'Leading Self', 'Leading Others' and 'Leading Communities'.

Participants' experiences of the programme reflect these stages. Early (Wave 1) participants rated 'Connecting with others' as the most valuable element of the programme (nine out of 20 people or 45 per cent chose this). Wave 2 participants, however, rated 'Knowledge and learning', which refers to the online content and masterclasses, the highest (11 out of 26 people or 42 per cent) chose this. The coaching sessions received the second highest ratings for both Wave 1 (six out of 20 people or 30 per cent) and Wave 2 (five out of 26 or 19 per cent). This could be because Wave 1 took place during the COVID-19 lockdowns and participants may therefore have valued human interaction more highly.

By Wave 2, participants were particularly appreciative of programme content which focused on models of leadership that they could apply in their local areas:

> **Learning the theory of leadership has helped to validate my decision-making. Applying frameworks we were taught on the CLA has meant that I can approach situations knowing I'm doing something that's commonly accepted, rather than inventing a solution and hoping for the best.**

(CLA participant)

> **Understanding more of the theory behind why people do what they do, and how I can react and do things differently has changed how I view community leadership.**

(CLA participant)

Some sessions stood out for participants and informed their thinking about what good leadership looks like. For instance, participants positively engaged with the session on imposter syndrome, which highlighted that good leadership looks different case by case. This helped individuals build confidence in their own leadership skills:

> **I am a leader within my community without actually realising it.**

(CLA participant)

> **I feel I have been given the tools to be more effective in a community leadership role and leading delivery partners. However, this is also balanced by having a better awareness of my own needs and red flags, "Can't pour from an empty cup". Sessions such as Overcoming Imposter Syndrome were really good, as this is something I recognised I had experienced at various times.**

(CLA participant)

Creating enabling and supportive spaces

Participants felt that the CLA delivery partners were instrumental in making them feel included and engaged in the programme, running sessions in a way that encouraged their journeys and cultivated a 'safe' and supportive space:

> **The respectful way the programme was led and delivered alongside the consideration for our wellbeing both in and out of the programme. The opportunities to talk to others, learn from each other and discover who you are as a leader. The coaching was such a privilege to have and really helped me to formulate my thoughts and create action for myself.**

(CLA participant)

> **I went into the programme not knowing what to expect and came out having learned a lot and having had a wonderful experience. One aspect I particularly enjoyed was how safe and supportive an environment it was. It was really nice to be able to share thoughts without fear of judgement and to celebrate everyone's successes.**

(CLA participant)

> **[The facilitator's] communication was always cheerful and friendly, and this was the main factor that drove me to join on days when I felt like I didn't want to attend!"**
>
> (CLA participant)

Online delivery was well-facilitated with space for peer learning and connections to be made. To encourage engagement in the programme, the delivery team created online spaces that successfully enabled participants to build strong relationships, share experiences and problem solve together:

> **It's a combination of the connections that they make with one another being on a carefully designed and curated programme that's aimed at supporting them through a journey. But also probably a lot to do with the atmosphere that we create where people can share with one another."**
>
> (Delivery partner)

> **[The] learning moment for me was … not feeling like the odd one out, but feeling I was in a room or a session with 'my people'… CLA saved a few Big Local journeys."**
>
> (CLA participant)

> **We've all got the same kind of goals and we all want the same for our community … it's nice to hear other people's ideas and there's no sort of hidden agendas with it. Everybody's quite open and honest."**
>
> (CLA participant)

Peer support sessions created a sense of community and that participants were 'all in this together'. This was particularly the case during Wave 1 (at the beginning of COVID-19), where a more engaged group of participants acted as a source of support for each other. Forming a group identity was a success factor in sustaining engagement throughout the programme.

Some participants also took the opportunity to connect outside of the programme, with a Wave 2 participant setting up an additional WhatsApp group to the one set up by the CLA delivery partners. This enabled them to connect and encourage each other in their leadership journeys during the programme and stay connected after it ended.

> **The WhatsApp groups are a great opportunity to stay connected and share learning after our involvement with CLA."**
>
> (CLA participant)

One of the key outcomes of the CLA has been its role in providing emotional and wellbeing support, in numerous ways, including a WhatsApp group, online sessions on wellbeing, building connections within and across Big Local partnerships and peer support and coaching:

> **I have done courses on leadership before – a lot wasn't new to me. It was familiar, but in a different context. What was useful was the group discussion/breakouts with others on the course. Emotional support – solidarity. Moral support. Shared experience/challenges. [It] made us all feel better to realise that."**
>
> (CLA participant)

Part two: Impact of the CLA programme

In this section, we explore the impact of the CLA programme on participants at an individual level, its impact on the Big Local partnership or other groups and the difference the programme is making at a community level.

Here, we are drawing on insights from 88 interviews, 33 observations, eight focus groups/ group discussions, 54 survey responses and four case studies (including an additional 34 interviews).

Key insights

Increased confidence has resulted in positive shifts in behaviour and practice, including recognising and overcoming imposter syndrome, gaining confidence to articulate views and ask questions, and to feel valued as experts with experience.

The extent to which participants can put learning into action and practise their leadership is determined by how responsive and supportive their Big Local partnership is.

Positive examples of partnership support have included making time to share learning, practising new approaches and participants taking on new roles in a partnership.

Examples of positive changes made within partnerships as a result of CLA participation include:

- Better pacing and chairing of meetings
- Greater awareness of conflicts of interest and managing boundaries
- Delegation between partnership members and taking on new roles
- Creating open and inclusive conversations
- Shifting power dynamics within a partnership and creating a sense of togetherness
- Building more grounded and effective decision-making
- Being more able to have difficult conversations within a partnership

Participants are making a positive change in their communities by:

- exploring or taking on new roles either with community organisations or in local councils.
- javing a better understanding of where power lies in the community and who to ask or influence to get things done.
- gaining confidence to take on new volunteer and paid roles with a community focus.

Impact on CLA participants

The CLA benefits individuals in two key areas:

- Improved self-awareness and awareness of others
- Increased confidence

Improved self-awareness and awareness of others

The first part of the CLA programme, 'Leading Self', focuses on individual development and self-awareness by learning through personal experiences and reflection rather than directive teaching. As a result, participants improved their self-awareness and empathy for others, e.g. understanding different individuals' needs and perspectives including Big Local partnership members, community members and also in family contexts. Most importantly, this included a greater consciousness of one's own needs, motivations, preferences and how one's resources could be depleted through this work, subsequently helping participants highlight the need for better self-care.

For some participants, the CLA was the first time they had stood back and reflected on other people's behaviour, considered why people act the way they do (i.e. their different needs, resources and motivations), and in turn how they might respond to these behaviours. This led to a greater awareness and a shift in how participants interacted with others:

> **[Self] reflection is a really significant part of this training in comparison to other training experiences I have had. And that plays out in how I am with my group."**
>
> (CLA participant)

> **I am passionate. I can lose my cool. That's been much better, listening, not biting people's heads off! Being a bit more detached."**
>
> (CLA participant)

The combination of online sessions, peer support and coaching complemented each other to support self-reflection and build greater awareness. Peer support sessions were an opportunity to learn from others, while coaching provided space to explore learning from an individual perspective:

> **Coaching sessions helped me to develop my own personal style and to stop and think about how other people learn things. Regarding group sessions, I go through life doing what I think is right, but these sessions have helped me to reflect that other people do things different and learn things differently."**
>
> (CLA participant)

Coaching was a crucial element in developing participants' awareness of how they and others work, particularly in understanding how people's different traits and behaviour can influence their actions and decisions. It was also used as a space to explore their wellbeing and contemplate what programme learning meant for them and their lives:

> **I think more about how I navigate my own wellbeing whilst learning how to lead effectively."**
>
> (CLA participant)

As a result, some participants decided to step back from their Big Local partnership, inspired by the idea that you must "look after yourself before you can look after others":

> **Being part of the CLA actually contributed to my decision to leave my partnership – I may return - but I realised that is what I needed to do. The CLA has at times led me to find my community work both more engaging but also exhausting. Because I understand more, I'm thinking it through more deliberately."**
>
> (CLA participant)

The best coaching experiences happened where coach and participant were well-matched. Koreo managed a large pool of coaches with diverse backgrounds and experiences, and from a range of geographies. Coach-participant matching was based on application information and a short 'chemistry' call between coach and participant. On the whole, participants found coaching to be a positive and essential component of the CLA programme. That said, there were occasions where the coaching did not work out between coach and participant. This may have been because a participant did not connect positively with their coach or did not see the value of coaching over the longer term. Some participants were not sure how to use the support:

> **Nobody on the CLA has asked for coaching … Any programme that just gives somebody a coach -there's a challenge there because that's not how coaching is set up to work. Coaching is a voluntary engagement between two people who have worked out whether they can talk to each other in a way that's helpful."**
>
> (Coach)

> **The struggle I'm having is knowing when to use them. Because I know we only have nine sessions, and I'm not very good at knowing when to use the session."**
>
> (CLA participant)

The separation between coaching and CLA delivery sessions helped participants to build self-awareness. Coaching was driven by participant need and it was their choice whether to explore topics from other elements of the programme.

However, sharing more information with coaches about the wider activities may have enabled them to better understand how their support sat alongside the rest of the programme and further enhanced the benefits of coaching for participants. Suggestions include sharing course materials or updates on the participants' engagement with other parts of the programme in advance of the coaching sessions.

This would enable coaches to understand how the information and content they provide could be more useful and effective for the participants:

> **I'm not sure we've fully resolved how involved they want coaches to be in the programme. We're not exactly [part of the delivery team]. I get the sense we're seen as independent beings, which we are, and we have to be careful to maintain confidentiality."**

(Coach)

Finally, while participants benefitted from the deeply reflective nature of the programme, it was emotionally demanding (see the vignette below). This was particularly the case for individuals with low self-esteem or confidence, who arguably needed additional support during the CLA, such as check-ins with coaches. Most participants recognised the advantages of this for their own development but it was too much for some and contributed to them dropping out of the programme. One participant described the coaching questions as 'too personal', another felt that, at the time, they did not have the emotional capacity or resilience needed. This raises the importance of ensuring participants understand the expectations of the programme from the outset.

Coaches also said that their work during the programme bordered on counselling at times, i.e. acting as someone to talk to and offload personal issues onto. This was valued by participants but coaches struggled to know how to provide appropriate support. It raises questions about the remit of the coaching role and the need for more clear-cut guidance at the outset:

> **There's another problem for the coach – that you sometimes end up as a counsellor, and I'm not a qualified counsellor. As a coach, you're very clear about that border, but if someone starts talking about their problems, you can't just hold your hand up and tell them to stop."**

(Coach)

Vignette one: The emotional demand associated with deep reflective work

For one participant, the focus of the first part of the programme (individual practice) was emotionally demanding because it required deep reflection on the way they had previously done things their community role:

> **I've loved the course. But it's not always been easy. [You have] to look at yourself and the way you would normally deal with things and to change your ways. I've spent 44 years doing things one way and, with the CLA, it's opened my eyes. But it definitely has been a personal reflection for me as well."**

On the whole, they found it hugely beneficial for personal development and understanding others' behaviour. For example, learning to realise that someone's lack of engagement might be due to personal circumstances, like low self-esteem as opposed to laziness. In response, they tried to find different ways to encourage people to engage and use their voice and to step back from some roles or commitments to help their partnership move forward:

> **What I've learned over the last six months is that I can't do everything. Even though I want to do everything, I can't. I've got to sit back and give all the other people an opportunity to do things."**

Increased confidence

We found many examples of increased confidence among participants in the CLA programme. For instance, when surveying participants and asking them the level they agree with the statement "*I feel more confident in my community leadership role because of the CLA*", 14 out of 20 (70 per cent) of Wave 1 and 23 out of 26 (88 per cent) of Wave 2 agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. In addition, we heard other examples of increased confidence, including:

- Participants being able to **recognise and name imposter syndrome[3]** and reduce this feeling through better self-awareness and peer support; recognising their work as 'community leadership' and giving themselves credit.

- Participants **asking more questions** which enhances discussion and decision-making within a partnership: "*Prior to CLA, I was hesitant to speak up at partnership meetings or express my views. I now feel a lot more confident and able to put new ideas to the group*".

- **Validation to 'step up or step back'** in a partnership or group, for example, taking on new roles and/or having the confidence to delegate responsibilities to others: "*I'm still doing it! – Without the Leadership Academy, I doubt I would still be the Chair of [my] Big Local. I've been able to step back, be more assertive, be more direct, be more self-confident*".

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[3] Imposter syndrome stems from the lack of belief in one's own skills, talents or accomplishments and the inability to believe that one's success is deserved.

- Participants **feeling valued as experts by their experience as residents** who understand their community, and who are in a powerful position to inform local decision-making.

The vignette below illustrates one participant's starting position and journey to building their confidence through the programme.

Vignette two: What helps build an individual's self-confidence during the CLA programme?

One participant, a parent and resident in the area, has lived with agoraphobia, which means being out in open spaces can be very challenging. They were becoming increasingly isolated, which was impacting their wellbeing. Wanting to improve their mental health, they decided to become involved with the local church which ran a local community coffee group organised by their area's Big Local partnership:

I started going to church – I suffered with agoraphobia. I had a [young] daughter. I plucked up the courage to go to a community coffee morning. It stemmed from there. I went to [the] coffee morning, started going to church, got my faith back. I was volunteering in the church and that gave me the confidence [to get more involved in the community]."

(CLA participant)

Previously describing themself as being 'in the background' of their community, they started volunteering with events like community lunches to feel more integrated. This gradually led to them 'taking the plunge' and joining the Big Local partnership.

A combination of factors, including attending church, support from the Locally Trusted Organisation (LTO), rep and vice chair, all contributed to building their self-esteem. They went on to become the vice chair of the partnership and, recently, the chair.

At the time of the CLA, they stepped into the role of Big Local chair which was a pivotal time for the participant. Initially, they didn't expect much from the CLA and weren't sure what it would entail. They didn't believe they would have much to contribute to discussions and didn't know how to use Zoom. However, driven by a desire to benefit the partnership, they took part.

The CLA has made a significant contribution to their self-confidence. Being nominated by the LTO and peer support from the cohort has been central to this growth:

I was honoured to be nominated, but it's not just for me, it's for the partnership."

By building trusting relationships within the CLA, they gradually felt able to share their own experiences and practice public speaking:

> **Finding other people going through the same things I'm going through - that's been really useful. It's not just my community/Big Local that is facing challenges."**
>
> (CLA participant)

Their fellow partnership members have been supportive in hearing learning from the programme and described a noticeable difference in this participant. Historically, the LTO organised the partnership meetings (e.g. chairing, taking minutes, and taking the actions forward). Since the CLA, this participant chairs meetings, adapts her language and activities to suit the setting, and actively tries to engage people more directly. For example, when making decisions, they ask, "Can I see a show of hands?". This has resulted in better discussions and more collective decision-making during partnership meetings:

> **They are a different woman. Their confidence from where they were to where [they] are now. They would go, 'Oh, no, no, I can't do that'. And to where they are now … bringing people to task in many respects, or, you know, being able to have confidence in terms of chairing. And so, I think it was probably an opportunity that they thought, 'You know what, I can do this'."**
>
> (Partnership member)

We have seen evidence of this increased confidence in nuanced and subtle shifts to individuals' behaviour and practice through:

- **Learning and applying active listening skills**. Recognising the need to give space for others to speak, by not jumping in, and practising active listening. This underpins better communication skills that participants have taken back to their partnerships:

> **… One thing that I kind of developed through the CLA in section two was focusing on curiosity and active listening … I listened before. But I just didn't realise there's a skill to it or a technique to it. So that's something that I've picked up."**
>
> (CLA participant)

> **Become aware of myself and the way I lead and how I can become a better leader/person by better listening and paying attention to others and their views."**
>
> (CLA participant)

- **The ability to articulate a viewpoint** in meetings with people who would normally have intimidated them and feel more confident to stand up for themselves. For example, one participant now feels able to state and value their opinion and to challenge prejudiced (racist) viewpoints in the community:

"It's given me the confidence to be clear when and why it's not OK if people are making sweeping statements – about migrants for example. But I do it in a friendly way!"

The opportunity for self-reflection in the 'safe' space provided by coaching was at the heart of the growth of confidence. Coaches were used as a sounding board, helping participants to come up with solutions which they can practise with their coach and discuss how to apply in real-life:

My coach said, 'try and practice your introduction, ready for your meeting tomorrow'. So that's what I did! I felt a lot more confident in introducing myself and explaining why I'm so passionate about the community."

(CLA participant)

There's an increase in the way a person holds their own boundaries, is not pushed around, spoken over, spoken down to. They've managed to work through some of those things. A way that somebody can discern plans for good community development and plans that would likely result in poorer community development, and to communicate why they think that. That's been an impressive change."

(Coach)

While we have seen clear shifts in individual confidence, the degree to which this has influenced change at a local level has varied. On the one hand, it can be a force for good, enabling participants to make changes that are long overdue in a struggling partnership. On the other hand, it can become 'part of the problem', manifesting as misplaced over-confidence or being overbearing in a group context.

We found several examples of participants rapidly growing in confidence, but other partnership members either feeling resistant to this change or 'left behind'. For example, some individuals may overinterpret the chair's leadership role, taking on too much responsibility and excluding others as a result. This highlights the need for the CLA (or Local Trust) to do more to connect positive experiences with the partnership as a whole and give more attention to embedding the programme in the partnership.

At its best, the building of participants' confidence runs through the CLA programme: from being nominated, to participation in sessions and coaching. This approach ensures participants feel supported and empowered throughout.

Impact on the Big Local partnerships

The second part of the CLA programme, 'Leading others', shifts the focus from building individual leadership skills to developing leadership capacity in and with others. The hypothesis is that learning from the CLA will cascade back to the partnership or organisation. We have seen and heard examples of positive change within partnerships because of CLA participation:

- An increase in the effectiveness of meetings, for example, as better chairing means partnership meetings now run to time.

- More awareness of conflicts of interest and the ability to manage boundaries.

- More delegating between partnership members/roles.

- Creating open and inclusive conversations.

- Shifting power dynamics and creating a sense of togetherness.

- Influencing more grounded and effective decision-making.

- Building better working relationships with Big Local members and workers.

- Having different/difficult conversations within the partnership.

Putting learning into practice

The impact of the CLA on a local partnership was most immediate when participants were able to directly link programme learning to their practice. This appears to be facilitated by four features:

1). **Opportunities to practise learning within partnerships**. For example, we saw participants taking on a formal role within the partnership, such as chair or vice-chair, allowing them to practise what they have learned. Leading on a project or task within the partnership, organisation or community also gave autonomy and space to experiment with behaving differently to before (see vignette below):

> **It is not enough to just be taught or hear about something; you need to put it into practice before [you] can apply it in the real world."**
>
> (CLA participant)

2). **Explicitly building spaces to practise in before embedding practices into programme delivery**. For example, peer support sessions to try things out before applying in a partnership or community context.

3). **Sharing and valuing lived experience**. Participants were encouraged to use their stories to create change in their communities. Wave 2 of the programme brought in previous participants who could share their leadership experience and bring the learning to life for participants. The way the CLA valued the experiences of community leaders from diverse settings helped participants build confidence in their roles within Big Local partnerships:

4). **Regular checkpoints to see how people are learning**. Participants may return to something a few months later and realise it is helpful. The CLA ran refresher sessions and sessions with graduated participants that helped provide real-life examples of putting learning into practice.

The vignette below illustrates one participant's experience of taking part in the CLA and having the opportunity to put what they learnt into practice within their Big Local partnership.

The talks in the masterclasses from fully fledged community leaders, who had moved up to take on their role and had become established leaders, were inspirational. The tips they gave - the post-it note wall, taking time for yourself, etc. Realising they had started out from where we were and gone on to become grounded community leaders gave hope."

(CLA participant)

Vignette three: The importance of putting learning into practice and the impact this can have on a Big Local partnership

One partnership member was nominated for the CLA by the chair of their Big Local area. The participant was driven to become a community leader to create change in their local area, "so that my children never have to be ashamed of where they live".

Although their engagement fluctuated throughout the programme due to life and work commitments, it was a positive and transformative experience. There has been a noticeable development in their self-awareness, confidence and bringing diplomacy when discussing sensitive topics. Their peers have felt that the meetings and spaces feel more open and inclusive than before:

The way that she engages with the partnership is more collaborative. It's not that she wouldn't have intended to be collaborative before, but she might push her point of view so forcefully, slightly flattening through others."

(Partnership member)

The impact of participating in the CLA has led to differences within the partnership, including:

- better communication within meetings and more efficient decision-making

- supporting a wider range of voices to be heard, as the participant has been more diplomatic and consciously sought different perspectives. This has encouraged other members to consider different views and opinions, creating more open and inclusive discussions

- drawing on lived experiences to inform decision-making as a result of feeling more confident in the value of this perspective.

Coaching, being part of a cohort, and peer learning all contributed to these shifts in confidence and in turn, partnership behaviours. Becoming vice chair gave the participant an opportunity to develop, practise and apply leadership skills. For example, recognising that leading in this role is not just about chairing meetings but also includes side conversations, preparation, additional thinking and relationship building:

> Give a leader responsibility ... It might not be vice chair, but … they need to do something where they can do a bit of learning without feeling they haven't done things successfully … I think it should be part of the leadership programme, that the partnership provides a way they can buy into it, as I say, put something on the agenda, but more importantly, you need to give the person a responsibility."

(Chair)

These shifts in partnership behaviour were possible because the partnership was receptive and open to reflecting on their collective leadership. It was facilitated by a range of partnership factors – the chair's leadership style, group dynamics and the history of the relationships. The CLA also came at an opportune moment for this partnership, aligning with the work they were doing around legacy – to depend less on the chair (who will retire soon) and encourage others to take on more roles and responsibility.

Influence of the Big Local partnership

Big Local partnerships have varying degrees of receptivity towards the CLA in terms of their interest supporting the participant's leadership development. For example, the vignette above illustrates the importance of the encouragement of the chair. Our findings also demonstrated variance in partnerships' readiness and willingness to learn and reflect on the partnership's approach to leadership.

Some actively supported participants to share learning and put this on partnership agendas but others felt it was a distraction from the 'real work' of partnership delivery.

In less receptive partnerships, participants encountered jealousy or resentment from other partnership members. There was concern from some participants that the way their partnerships worked could block positive changes resulting from the CLA learning.

In the vignette below, one participant reflects on the role their partnership played in being able to successfully influence change.

Vignette four: Influence of the Big Local partnership on a participant's experience of the CLA

My CLA journey began with the pilot. From the beginning, I felt like it was for everybody in my Big Local area. I was a representative: the face of the partnership. I felt privileged to be part of it and happy to have the opportunity to take part. I expected that after the training, I'd come back and report. But one thing I noticed from the very beginning is that it seemed some people on the partnership were thinking 'Why her?'"

There wasn't any outward happiness or delight at me being chosen. But I never saw it as just for me. I talked to my coach. She said, 'You are important too'. But why do I matter? She repeated that it is an opportunity for me, and I felt guilty. Is it for me or for the Big Local [area]? Unfortunately, there was no interest from the partnership in terms of what I was embarking on. That nearly broke me. But I just powered my way through."

Then COVID-19 came, and the first signs of what I had gained from the CLA started to show – resilience and tenacity. I started to feel as if people found me to be a threat. People [were thinking] of a way of making me feel small, like you are wasting time and not doing Big Local work."

At one point, I said to the chair, 'We need to be attending these clusters [events for Big Local areas by region or topic], not being so insular'. But they saw me attending those things as a competition. They said that I should be concentrating on Big Local stuff and thinking that Local Trust keeps putting in these things to distract from Big Local work. "

You need an ally. I think Local Trust should go back to needing two or three people from each area to attend an event together. It's separated me out."

Several factors influence the readiness or willingness of a partnership to engage in the CLA by supporting individual participants and embedding learning into their collective approach to leadership:

Individual
- Participants recognising and having the ability to distribute learning from the programme.
- Having tools and techniques to distribute and embed learning. For example, a rolling agenda item to share learning at partnership meetings, or the ability to share recordings of online sessions with partnerships.
- Resources that can be shared with the partnership to help bring members along the journey (although it is essential to be aware that this may put the responsibility onto the individual).

Partnership
- Commitment from the whole partnership and buy-in to the aims of the programme. For this to happen, partnerships need to understand what the CLA involves and what the expectations around participating in it are, from the outset. The success of this relies on Local Trust communicating with the Big Local areas about the programme, the recruitment processes and the expectations for participant engagement. It also depends on Big Local areas having interest, engagement and time to digest learning.
- An appetite for listening, reflecting and shifting internal leadership practice.
- Opportunities and space to adopt, practise and embed learning, for example, holding meetings in different ways.

Applying principles of community leadership

Using the term and concept 'community leadership' has, at times, been challenging for participants. At the start of the programme, it felt unrelatable as many participants did not perceive themselves as a leader:

> **It can be hard to recognise yourself as the leader. It feels sometimes like you're not good enough – qualified enough."**
>
> (CLA participant)

However, an understanding of and affinity with the term grew throughout the programme. In total, 16 out of 20 (80 per cent) of Wave 1 participants and 25 out of 26 (96 per cent) of Wave 2 participants said they had a greater understanding of community leadership. Learning about different leadership styles helped participants to see themselves – and feel comfortable calling themselves – community leaders. Owning this title has helped to validate the work they do in the community:

> **I think that I am a leader of myself – my preferred leadership style is like a narrow boat. Gently steering at the back of the boat, gentle nudges along the way. Put forward new ideas and give plenty of time to exercise these."**
>
> (CLA participant)

However, the label of 'leader' is not as important as the process and journey that CLA participants go on:

> **I don't need to be an expert or label myself as a leader but have learned to recognise the skills that I do have and to mobilise these skills in different situations."**

(CLA participant)

> **I don't need to make a song and dance about doing leadership. At the end of the day, the main thing is that it gets done by any means possible."**

(CLA participant)

> **A lot of the people I was coaching wouldn't have identified themselves as leaders, probably wouldn't find themselves in spaces of leadership development typically. And that is quite important, and that can be quite legitimising."**

(Coach)

These reflections align with the work the CLA delivery team have been doing to develop the definition and description of 'community leadership' within the programme. This work includes the publication '*Leading Change: Why now is the time to invest in community leadership*'[4], which shares the critical theory of 'distributed leadership' which underpins the CLA:

> **Leadership ... [is] shared across those who have relevant skills and expertise and can shift around according to context and circumstance. United by a common purpose or outcome, a community exercising distributed leadership will see many different people – whether out in front, out back, introverted or extroverted – influence and lead change in multiple different ways."**

(Goulden, 2022)

The role of distributed leadership

The CLA approach to leadership is centred on the idea of shifting from individual to more distributed leadership in local areas (i.e. via the Big Local partnership). The programme provided training on this concept and helped participants to explore what it means in practice, like how to share roles and responsibilities within their partnerships. The success of this has varied, due to a number of factors that were beyond the participants' or programme's control.

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[4] Goulden, H (2022) '*Leading change: Why now is the time to invest in community*'. Local Trust: London.

This raises questions about if and how far participants can put learning into practice if the leadership of the wider partnership is not distributed, or at least open to influence in this direction. The vignette below demonstrates how building an individual's leadership capacity can benefit a partnership. However, it also highlights the challenges if the wider partnership is not receptive to a more distributed approach to leadership.

Vignette five: Bringing other partnership members along on the journey

During the CLA, one participant took on the role of chair within their Big Local partnership. This enabled them to build on their new-found confidence by having a place to practice and apply learning from the CLA. The partnership saw a noticeable change in the participant's energy and ideas having been part of the CLA. They were receptive to hearing their learning at meetings, and subsequently to revamping some of their activities, like community lunches, as a result of reflecting on this learning.

However, the partnership has a complicated history that it is trying to overcome, including challenging internal power struggles created by the previous chair, and backlash from the community to the partnership's proposed activities. This led to mistrust and poor relationships in the community. This complexity has reduced the motivation of the partnership to move forward, while the participant has a new sense of energy and drive. This misalignment has been difficult to manage. The participant has had to navigate bringing other partnership members along with them at the right pace and re-building their confidence in leading the community:

> And I've kind [of] realised through doing the course that's why other people are not engaging [in the Big Local partnership], and that maybe they haven't got the confidence. So, I think it's important to make sure that all people have a voice … to try and get people more engaged. And show people that they too can be leaders."

(CLA participant)

Building confidence can be empowering and give individuals a sense of legitimacy to lead. However, they also need to be encouraged by the partnership. For some participants, the CLA built their confidence to such an extent that they felt able to:

- Ask for more responsibility locally.
- Hold those in more formal leadership positions to account.
- Put new issues onto the agenda.

They were also more likely to take up activities beyond the partnership or move into formal leadership roles. However, this was an upward battle in other partnerships due to their hierarchical ways of working that centred formal leadership roles (i.e. a chair) who set rather than co-produced the agenda. In these partnership contexts, individuals retreated from the partnership and became involved in their communities in other ways. So, despite not being in the Big Local partnership, the CLA leadership learning is still dispersing into the community and making positive impact.

The CLA model places responsibility on the individual to share learning within a partnership where much is outside of their control. This highlights the risk of investing in one person and the benefit of including multiple partnership members (or the whole partnership) in the programme, to build greater collective responsibility to share and take on learning. In Wave 2, the CLA responded to this by extending its offer to support groups of participants (more than one participant from the same partnership or external organisation) to directly promote and distribute learning within Big Local partnerships and wider communities. In total, 15 Big Local partnerships put forward multiple people for the CLA. It was hoped a group approach would help empower a distributed leadership approach. In practice, however, it had varying degrees of success.

When speaking to one partnership that involved "*two [geographic] areas that sit very separately*", they recognised that they did not work to their full potential. By having a participant from each area, they were able to reflect on how they communicated and worked together to improve partnership working. They could see it was a key way to bring people together, learn through shared topics and ideas, and to improve power dynamics within partnerships.

However, in practice, many who applied as a group were in different programme cohorts or did not attend the same sessions due to conflicting personal commitments. Rather than seeing themselves as a group, many who submitted group applications saw their experiences as "*two individuals in Big Local who've gone to this training*".

One of our case studies had four partnership members taking part in Wave 2 (and previously had two in Wave 1). Despite this high level of participation, the CLA's intention to encourage shared learning had yet to be included in the partnership's meetings. As a result, most saw the CLA as a personal development opportunity: '*It's not clear the benefit of the group approach – we haven't particularly shared learning*'. This raises questions about whether the CLA was designed to enable this cascade of learning, what needs to be in place to facilitate this, and the need for participants/partnerships to buy in to the process of making it a group endeavour.

Further thought is necessary to consider how to empower individuals to take up distributed responsibilities, to participate in holding one another to account in a productive way, and to practise sharing leadership in a 'safe' place. For example, participants should feel comfortable and encouraged to apply what they have learnt in their partnerships. It is essential to outline the programme's expectations and to define what applying learning could look like for participants at the outset in order to achieve shared learning across a partnership. This might mean a) asking participants and, ideally, members from the partnership to explore how learning could be brought back in a way that works for the partnership and b) for participants to understand where the opportunities are to bring learning back to their partnership. For example, it could be formalised as an agreement during the CLA to support the individual to reflect on their learning.

Impact on the wider community

The final part of the CLA programme focuses participants on 'Leading Communities', helping them to apply their learning about different leadership approaches and the complexity of working with and leading others, to the context of their community.

It is difficult to assess the direct community impact or change resulting from a CLA participant's action for two main reasons:

1). **The challenge of attribution**. The CLA impact at a community level is a story of contribution. Many contextual factors can influence change in a community: the multifarious inputs from local groups and organisations, public agencies, local and online communication channels and practical work. The wider the geographic area, the more difficult it becomes to demonstrate a direct correlation between an individual's action or input and an outcome. It is therefore more realistic to look for areas of probable impact as a result of the CLA participants.

2). **Local and national context**. During the life of the CLA programme, the national social, economic and political context in the UK has changed dramatically. This has significantly affected the extent to which CLA participants, their Big Local areas and other community groups have been able to effect lasting change. In the early days of the CLA programme, Big Local areas grappled with and responded creatively to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic[5] while facing cuts to local services in

their area. Now, Big Local partnerships are flexing to provide support at the sharp end of the current cost of living crisis. Big Local areas and other community groups are responding to meet the growing needs of their local communities emerging from these crises, but they continue to endure local and national contextual challenges which may limit the opportunity for lasting community change and impact. Other research commissioned by Local Trust explores the impact of these changes and the achievements of Big Local areas over the last ten years: Our Bigger Story and Communities in Control.

In this section, we explore the clear evidence of CLA participants becoming more involved in local community leadership or enhancing their existing practice to affect community-level change.

Examples of community impact

The CLA supported community leaders to see their leadership in a wider context. Participants acknowledge that the CLA led them to reconsider what they would put themselves forward for in their local community:

I wouldn't necessarily have gone to a council meeting or to meet my MP – but CLA has been about seeing your voice as important – and understanding the processes of things, how to pull strings … who you need to point things out to."

(CLA participant)

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[5] Paine et al. (2022) One Pandemic Many Responses

> **I felt I didn't belong at the table as a leader. This programme has pulled through people who would not naturally have been chosen as leaders … it has spurred me on."**
>
> (CLA participant)

> **The CLA has helped thinking about, for example, knowing who to go to influence, who has experience and insight to make decisions. It's about speaking to the people who know stuff – going through those who know – then you know the gaps in between!"**
>
> (CLA participant)

Some participants are now taking on or considering roles outside their Big Local area, such as other voluntary work, councillor positions or working in their parish. For example, one participant said they would never have considered becoming a local councillor, but now sees the opportunity as a way of having a positive local influence:

> **[In a] meeting with the local council, the police, I hold them more accountable. I expect a certain level of openness and accountability on their part. We've had [to be accountable] with reports that we've made to them … And they're meant to do certain things and they don't. I will be assertive in those meetings, now more than ever!"**
>
> (CLA participant)

There were also several examples of participants who had taken on new roles in other community organisations or groups. For example, one participant, who previously experienced low self-esteem and poor mental health, developed their confidence by taking part in the CLA programme and subsequently went on to take a lead role in co-ordinating a local table tennis club.

One participant described how being involved in the CLA has developed their confidence and public speaking skills, which has led to them recently doing a press release about their own experiences of being part of the living wage campaign:

> **The Academy has helped me to learn how to speak differently and how to tell my story of how I got to where I am now."**
>
> (CLA participant)

The vignette below outlines the difference that being part of the CLA made to an 'emerging leader' – someone who did not see themselves as a leader but the CLA led to them taking an active leadership role locally.

Vignette six: The difference the CLA programme can have on the wider community

At the outset, this participant did not identify as a community leader:

❝ You don't realise how much you influence your community when you're doing work in the community."

(CLA participant)

The CLA participant's confidence grew, particularly in relation to their own skills and ability to learn and develop. They took on a role as a Big Local worker for the area, led on project management with the local council about the development of a skate park on the estate, and took responsibility for the partnership review and new plan:

❝ Before [being on the CLA], I couldn't imagine myself doing that [working with the council]. Now I know where to go for help and funding – it's about building partnerships."

(CLA participant)

A council officer described the changes in this participant's approach:

❝ [She has] an openness to engage – a willingness and interest in the local people around and what their issues are, an open quality towards communication and listening … and the dynamism to want to act and move things forward."

(Council officer)

The CLA participant was key in making things happen in the area, including a new community plan and direct work with the community architect at the council:

❝ She's been our main point of contact – for project meetings, progress meetings on site. It's helped the flow of communication. I've definitely seen how her confidence has built over that period – being more forthcoming in meetings and on calls which is good to see."

(Council officer)

Wider impact on the community: The development of the skate park is particularly relevant to the health, wellbeing and sporting opportunities for children and young people on the estate:

> **It's a provision for young people, as well as children and families. It's already very popular! The aim has been to support healthy lives, getting people to be active and testing skills! It's also for scooters and BMX-ers, so will bridge a range of ages. There's a play area as part of the development, so it's a huge injection into the local area that was previously lacking."**

(Council officer)

What enables community impact

Understanding local infrastructure, decision-making and power dynamics
As discussed in earlier sections, the CLA helped participants refine their understanding of community leadership in context, engage with how it connects with their own experience and objectives, and explore how it works in practice. The programme also supported participants to understand local infrastructure and start to build wider community connections linked to the change they wanted to see.

Participants were invited to explore how local systems and decision-making work, and where power lies. This was not always easy. Sometimes participants struggled to find the appropriate starting point or remit for their local activism on issues that felt too big to influence, for example COVID-19 and latterly the Cost of Living crisis.

The programme was successful in helping participants identify where decisions are made in the community (outside the Big Local area) and seek to influence those organisations or groups. This also included looking at how to better align Big Local partnerships with other community partners for greater collective impact. For example, working with the local authority or community groups to influence, gain funding, build relationships and avoid duplication.

> **I am more empowered to initiate the change I would like to see in the community. I now have a better idea of how to mobilise people who have a shared cause as well as larger organisations that could potentially support such movements."**

(CLA participant)

Valuing the voice and lived experience of participants

As discussed in the section on impact on participants, the CLA increased participants' confidence to lead. More specifically, it fostered belief and recognition of participants being 'experts in their area' and an awareness of where this input is missing in other decision-making spaces. The CLA advocates for the value that participants have as experts in their area with lived experience of the issues they are trying to tackle:

> **It gave me confidence as a resident – you're the expert on your area."**

(CLA participant)

> **I don't feel I am a leader but I know I have to take on a new role … to ensure representation beyond those who are usually community decision makers."**

(CLA participant)

> **We have the confidence to say what those needs are and to have rigorous and robust conversations about this."**

(CLA participant)

> **The CLA has kind of increased that sense of being more aware of my worth, and what value I can bring to my community. Then also boosting my confidence to be someone who initiates things and not just support other people's events or ideas."**

(CLA participant)

As the Big Local programme moves toward its conclusion in 2026, these examples of community impact may also be part of Big Local's legacy story – CLA participants connecting with other organisations and local decision-making in their locality in a sustainable way.

Local infrastructure

In the final phase of fieldwork, we heard from CLA participants about how community networks are important in putting into practice what they have learned in a real context. These spaces allowed them to see how their new skills translate into influencing and initiating ideas to bring about the positive change they want for their communities.

Participants talked about the important role that existing local infrastructure played, including the Big Local partnership, community projects, and organisations that have a remit to support community volunteering (i.e. Councils for Voluntary Service (CVS) or volunteer centres). These groups contributed to both personal and community change for some participants.

The CLA built participants' awareness of what needs to be in place to achieve change locally. This sometimes led to frustration and demotivation when these elements were missing. For example, if participants could not change things with the Big Local area, or felt they were not being listened to.

Some participants described the courage needed to move beyond the partnership (which can be seen in the examples above) into wider community structures and the wider community. Their ability to make a difference is dependent on having both the opportunity and confidence to do so.

For the second wave of delivery, the CLA worked with partner organisations to recruit participants, extending the reach of the programme beyond Big Local areas, as that had the potential for the CLA to influence wider community impact.

CLA has experienced challenges engaging with some participants nominated from partner organisations. Reasons for this include partner participants not sharing the context and language of the Big Local programme, issues around communicating the aims of the CLA, with partners and participants not being clear about what they are signing up to; and the difference in support available for participants from partners in comparison to Big Local participants. As mentioned previously, nine of the 22 participants recruited by partner organisations dropped out of the programme.

Interviews with four partner participants, two partner organisations and data collected from the retrospective workshop indicated this was because they came to the CLA from a different context to those that continued. They had no Big Local reps to support them, divergent expectations about community leadership, and felt as if they were excluded from and didn't understand the Big Local terminology. The delivery team have tried to address this, for example, by adapting the language in their communication resources. However, part of the problem is the very different relationship between participants coming forward from partner organisations (as opposed to Big Local areas) which can put the relationship on the back foot right from the beginning:

> **The system that we put in place doesn't fit perfectly … the sign of success for a community programme is making it flexible enough that things can change, react and grow."**
>
> (Partner organisation)

The Big Local network and support from Local Trust have been key components at all points of contact with the CLA, from participants' initial engagement with the programme, feeling supported and part of a wider movement, and considering what is left behind once the Big Local programme comes to an end. Local Trust has piloted a Community Leadership Academy Fellowship, for people who had been through the programme. This was made up of a number of events where fellows could come together and share their experiences and learning following on from the CLA. This fellowship is being rolled out to Wave 2 participants in 2023.

At a national level, CLA alumni have been central to supporting the development of a group (Big Locals Together) that brings Big Local areas together[6] to think beyond the end of programme in 2026. Topics of conversation include building capacity, seeking funding and sustainability, and being mindful that at this stage of the Big Local programme there is a need to look beyond to legacy and sustainable change within the community.

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[6] At the time of writing this consisted of four Wave 1 participants, with further participants potentially joining from Wave 2 (and now Wave 3).

Part three: Lessons for community leadership initiatives

Learning was built into the CLA from the outset. As the evaluation and learning partners, we worked alongside the CLA as it pivoted online in early 2020. We have since seen the programme develop and adapt to participant feedback and evaluation learning. This section builds on the findings in this report so far to draw out key learning from the CLA.

CLA values

Three values have emerged that have been key to CLA's success:

1. **Flexibility and adaptation.** Flexibility remained a key principle of the programme, alongside a willingness to respond to participants' needs and feedback. Throughout, we heard how the latter had been taken on board and how the value of lived experience was built into the programme approach. Flexibility was also shown by providing a range of ways for participants to engage with the programme.

2. **Reflective spaces.** Participants were given reflective spaces to explore their practice, new ways of working and means of self-care. This was particularly significant during COVID-19 when health inequalities deepened and the mental wellbeing of many suffered. [7]

3. **Relational.** People and relationships are at the centre of the CLA programme. This emphasis manifested in a range of ways, including peer learning opportunities. places to connect informally, and the delivery team being open and sharing their direct experiences. It can also be seen in the centrality of coaching within the programme. At its best, the trusted relationship between coach and participant enabled participants to feel supported in their community work and for their experience to be valued.

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[7] Abdallah, S. Wren-Lewis, S. and Maguire, R. (2021) The impact of the pandemic on subjective wellbeing inequalities. What Works Centre for Wellbeing, June 2021.

CLA approach

There are four distinctive and successful features of the CLA approach:

1. National, hyperlocal and individual.
The CLA successfully operated at multiple levels, applying core elements of community development (such as building trust, inclusivity and relational working) to support individual leadership. This was true in terms of how the CLA was delivered, as a predominantly online programme which had positive uptake among local residents and in the thematic structure of the programme: Leading Self; Leading Others; and Leading in the Community.

2. A different approach to leadership.
The programme successfully steered away from traditional ideas of leadership (i.e. the 'heroic' charismatic individual who holds a formal position of power) by engaging with individuals who did not see themselves as leaders and supporting them to distribute leadership throughout their partnerships and communities. It emphasised the importance and value of distributed leadership. However, individuals can only take this so far. Where it was not possible for participants to change how their partnership worked, we alternatively found positive examples of participants taking on new roles.

3. The power of lived experience.
Participants felt valued as experts by experience. The programme boosted some participants' confidence to make the case for their community, to ensure their viewpoint was heard by decision-makers and to positively influence local developments.

4. Enabling and embedding a learning environment. Overall, the CLA was well-facilitated, and participants described feeling 'safe' in the online and in-person spaces that the programme provided.

Additionally, two aspects have remained challenging throughout the process:

- **Engaging partner organisations**. CLA's aim was for Big Local participants to operate within the existing Big Local programme's support and infrastructure, including working with, reps/area co-ordinators, having shared communication platforms, such as Workplace (a business communications tool that helps organisations stay connected – it has similar features to Facebook but they are separate platforms); and attending existing thematic and regional learning events. The challenge of engaging participants from partner organisations highlights the need for: clarity of expectations (for partners and participants) and resources and networks around the participant. We understand that this is a priority for Wave 3 of the CLA.

- **The programme encountered challenges when supporting participants to integrate and act on learning within partnerships.** We found this in how individuals took the CLA learning back into their Big Local partnerships. For example, there were cases where participants perceived their partnership as being the barrier to sharing their learning. Reasons for this included other partnership members not recognising the value of the CLA and therefore not giving airtime during meetings to share learning as well as partnerships not being receptive to change, as well, from the programme. Dissemination of learning was also difficult in the instances where multiple partnership members attended the CLA as their group participation was not coordinated.

Final reflections

The CLA has been successful in enabling people who don't ordinarily identify as leaders to achieve their potential. It has demonstrated that tailored and focused support to individual community leaders can transform their confidence and understanding of the leadership role, enabling them to create and take up opportunities for positive community change.

The programme has helped community leaders to name, recognise and overcome imposter syndrome. It has been characterised by inclusivity, flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of participants and awareness of the diversity of experience of people who are part of the Big Local programme.

To this end, the CLA benefited significantly from the Big Local infrastructure, but challenges remain in how to translate this to scale and within different contexts.

The CLA has supported participants during times of national crisis (the COVID-19 pandemic and the Cost of Living crisis). Additionally, as the nature of the Big Local programme has itself changed as it draws closer to the end, the CLA has played a role in helping participants consider their personal legacies and the difference they hope to make individually.

In some cases, the CLA has led to decisions to step back from Big Local partnerships and in others, it has prompted participants to forge new contacts and relationships with organisations in their communities, building on a foundation of newly-grown confidence and knowledge.

Appendix: Evaluation approach and data collection

Our approach to evaluation and learning aimed to:

- generate developmental learning to inform programme design
- understand the difference the CLA makes to individuals, Big Local areas and their wider communities
- explore how the CLA approach might develop beyond Big Local.

We used participatory methods to create accessible opportunities for participants to share their experiences and views as the programme developed. The learning from our work was shared at regular workshops with Local Trust and the CLA delivery partners to help shape the programme.

Research methods

Over the last three years, we have followed the experiences of participants engaging in the CLA programme to understand the difference it has made to them. We tracked the journey of 25 participants through 67 interviews. We also developed case studies with four Big Local partnerships to gather a more in-depth understanding of how individual participants can make a difference to their Big Local partnership and wider communities. The participants and case studies included were selected to meet a range of criteria, such as being geographically dispersed and demographically varied.

Throughout the three years, we created opportunities for all CLA participants to feed into the evaluation and shape the programme delivery, seeking wherever possible to include the feedback of those with a less positive experience of the programme, including those nominated to take part but not successful in their application or participants who dropped out. Our priority throughout was to align evaluation and learning activities with CLA delivery where we could, to minimise the time burden on participants whilst maximising learning opportunities.

This report draws on:

- **a review of academic, policy and practice literature** on community leadership and other community leadership programmes
- **88 interviews** with 25 CLA participants; nine coaches; five members of the delivery team; four Local Trust staff; three partner organisations and external stakeholders
- **observation** of 28 online programme sessions; an advisory meeting; recruitment selection meetings; and graduation/wrap up sessions
- **two focus groups:**
  - nine external stakeholders delivering community leadership programmes exploring community leadership context and learning from the CLA
  - three Big Local reps who had partnership members involved in the CLA

- **four learning sessions with participants at CLA events**

- **four case studies** of Big Local partnerships. These included: observing partnership meetings; 34 interviews with 12 CLA participants, 18 partnership members and four other stakeholders (including local service providers and residents). We also provided training on filmmaking and interviewing techniques to co-produce a short film

- **three online surveys of CLA participants** that received a total of 54 responses. We ran two end of wave surveys to understand the difference the CLA had made, and a 'distance travelled' survey to explore lasting changes after the programme

- **ongoing secondary analysis of CLA programme data**, including onboarding notes; participant session feedback surveys; and participant engagement data

- **eight learning workshops** that shared emerging data with Local Trust and the delivery partners. We used a co-designed evaluation framework to identify themes, patterns and learning. Seven learning workshops took place with Local Trust and the CLA delivery partners. We also held a 'share and build' workshop in November 2022 with CLA participants, coaches, Local Trust and delivery partners to share learning and shape the final report

Throughout our work, we produced a range of outputs to share learning with different audiences, including slide decks, blogs, interim reports and summaries for participants. A short co-produced film complements these written outputs, documenting the story of one individual's involvement in the CLA programme.

Outline of data collected at different stages				
Data tool	**Pilot**	**Wave 1**	**Wave 2**	**Total**
Qualitative data				
Interviews					**TOTAL = 88 interviews**
	Delivery team	3 (people)		2 (people)	5 interviews
	Local Trust	3 (people)		1 (people)	4 interviews
	Participants	5 (people)	R1 = 10 people		
	R2 = 7 people				
	R3 = 9 people				
	CLA nominees/did not apply = 2	R1 = 15 people			
	R2 = 9 people				
	R3 = 10 people	67 interviews			
	Coaches	2 (people)	3 (people)	4 (people)	9 interviews
	Stakeholder	1 (people)			1 (+ 9 below) = 10
	Partner organisations			2 (people)	2 interviews
Focus groups					**TOTAL = 12 focus group participants**
	External stakeholders (Community Leadership round table)			1 x 9 people	
	Big Local reps			1 x 3 people	
Observations					**TOTAL = 33 session/ meeting observations**
	Advisory board meeting	1			1
	Online sessions		18	10	28
	Graduation/wrap-up session		1	1	2
	Recruitment process		1	1	2

	Outline of data collected at different stages				
	Data tool	Pilot	Wave 1	Wave 2	Total
	Qualitative data				
Facilitated sharing points with groups of participants					TOTAL = 5 sharing sessions with participants
	Retrospective sessions		1	1	2
	Retreat 'story station' – evaluation activities		1 (15 participants est.)	1 (21 participants)	2
	Share and Build			1 (4 CLA participants, 2 coaches, 3 Local Trust staff, 3 delivery team)	1
In-depth case studies					TOTAL = 4 case studies (34 interviews, further engagement/ outputs listed)
	Complete case studies		2	2	4 case studies
	CLA participant interviews		5 (people)	7 (people)	12 interviews
	Partnership member interviews		9 (people)	9 (people)	18 interviews
	External stakeholder interviews e.g. voluntary organisations, local residents, public agency		2 (people)	2 (people)	4 interviews
	Observations e.g. partnership meetings, away days		2	4	6 observations
	Online workshops		1		1 online workshop
	Co-produced film			1	1 film

Outline of data collected at different stages					
	Data tool	**Pilot**	**Wave 1**	**Wave 2**	**Total**
Qualitative data					
Surveys	End of year survey		1 (20 responses)	1 (25 responses)	
	'Distance travelled' survey			1 (9 responses)	
	Big Local survey		1		