

Local Trust
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The Big Local story: A summary of our learning from the Big Local programme

How our learning from the design and delivery of Big Local could inform future funding programmes

Local Trust

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Cover photo: Group sitting together in Noel Park (Press Record).



Big Local is a unique programme that puts residents across England in control of decisions about their own lives and neighbourhoods.

It is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF) who, in 2011, awarded £1m to each of 150 Big Local areas. As a result of the areas' collective decision to pool and invest the money they didn't immediately need, each subsequently went on to receive an additional £150K.

The Big Local programme was designed to reach communities that had not historically received Lottery money or public funding. The areas chosen were amongst the 20 per cent most deprived on the [Index of Multiple Deprivation \(IMD\)](#) and also lacked civic assets. The hypothesis was that they were not receiving their fair share of funding because they lacked organisations and individuals with the knowledge, skills and contacts to raise it.

From the outset, Big Local was designed to be radically different from other funding programmes. Contrasting with conventional, top down, time-limited, project-led funding, awards were made

to Big Local areas on the basis that they could be spent over time, at communities' own pace, and according to their own plans and priorities.

Supporting the design of a Community Wealth Fund

As it moves closer to its end in 2026, the Big Local programme demonstrates the positive impact that can be achieved if a substantial award is made direct to underserved communities to spend, over an extended period (10–15 years), according to priorities set by residents.

There are lessons here for the proposed community wealth fund, announced by the government early in 2023, to "give local residents in some of the more deprived areas of the country the power to improve where they live and invest in what's important to them" (Department for Culture, Media and Sport Minister Stuart Andrew, March 2023).



This summary outlines learning from the Big Local programme that might support the framework design of such funds. It distils the findings of significant research on the programme, examining different aspects of design and delivery to inform its development. It also reflects discussions with the Local Trust staff team and Big Local partnership members and learning from their experience.

The paper focuses on some of the considerations that informed the design of the Big Local programme. It makes four distinct recommendations about the framework for distribution of a community wealth fund:

- 1. Establish a new, dedicated national delivery agency, as opposed to contracting with an existing organisation or using a consortium model.**
- 2. Set clear criteria for the identification of areas to benefit.**
- 3. Develop flexible infrastructure to support community leadership.**
- 4. Provide relatively small amounts of funding to each area but – crucially – over the long term.**

There is also a recommendation about the size of investment needed in a Community Wealth Fund for it to have an impact.

“With local residents making decisions, that means no one is telling us what we should do or how we should do it. We don’t spend all of our time asking permission, chasing funds or jumping through funding hoops. Instead, we have developed plans that really matter to us, plans that we really care about making happen, that we get on with delivering, because we really care about our community.”

Rebecca Woods, Ewanrigg Big Local

1. Establish a new national delivery agency

There are a few options as regards the distribution of a community wealth fund:

- Giving responsibility to an existing organisation
- Using a consortium delivery approach
- Setting up a new specialist organisation

Local Trust believes that establishing a new independent organisation, funded through a ‘spend out’ endowment, would provide the foundation for delivering a community wealth fund consistently, with a complete focus on achieving the ambitions that the government has set out for it.

Establishing Local Trust as a new, dedicated, independent organisation to deliver the Big Local programme, as opposed to contracting with a pre-existing organisation, had many benefits,

- A focus on mission and benefit to the communities served, avoiding mission drift or distraction because of competing organisational strategies and priorities.
- The creation of space to test, adapt and tailor the approach taken, rather than being influenced or bound by established approaches, funding practices and attitudes to risk.
- The building of strong relationships of trust between Local Trust staff and the key stakeholders in Big Local areas, because there was no ‘baggage’ from previous initiatives.
- A convening, ‘honest broker’ role for Local Trust in some complex and challenging community environments because it was not viewed as a competitor for funding or influence.

- The development of a strong organisational culture which is future orientated, entrepreneurial and focused on learning.
- The recruitment of staff who matched the skills and competencies required.

Bringing the two functions of funder and community developer/capacity builder together in one new independent organisation has also been crucially important to the success of the programme. It enables one function to inform and support the other, contributing to organisational learning and making delivery more effective because it is constantly moulded to the varying needs of areas as they evolve over the life of the programme.

Local Trust's experience indicates that a consortium approach would not be optimum. Big Local was originally operated by a consortium of organisations that provided services under contract to the programme.

While this allowed for delivery to start quickly, it became problematic: the size of the outsourced contracts reduced the resources available for the central team,

its capacity to effectively manage the programme and in particular its ability to respond to new needs as they emerged.

The consortium approach also led to conflicts of interest in addressing issues with contract delivery.

2. Set clear criteria for which areas benefit

The general intention of the Big Local programme was clear – it should benefit places that were both deprived (according to the IMD) and which had also not received their fair share of Lottery and other public funding compared with other places.

The hypothesis was that these places had missed out because they lacked civic capacity in the form of individuals and organisations with the knowledge and networks to successfully apply for funding. However, Local Trust's experience has been that this framing did not translate into appropriate criteria which were consistently applied when choosing areas. This has proven problematic.



The selection of the 150 areas was led by National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF) staff; they nominated areas to benefit in different regions. Typically, they consulted with local authorities and/or the local voluntary sector, such as Councils for Voluntary Service (CVSs) or other local infrastructure organisations. Decisions on which areas would benefit were informed by these consultations/negotiations.

As a result of this process, at programme launch a significant number of Big Local areas were not 'natural' communities, in the sense that they were recognised or understood by people locally. In some cases, boundaries were imposed that crossed several estates (or parts of estates), wards or even villages. In other cases, boundaries did not always respect existing features that demarcated an area, whether natural (for example rivers), or manmade (for example, ward or estate boundaries, railway lines or major arterial roads).

The population size of Big Local areas also varied greatly in 2011, ranging from 1,237 (Ewanrigg) to 17,775 (Little Hulton). Research commissioned by Local Trust, examining lessons from previous hyperlocal programmes, suggests that areas work best with a population of 6–8,000 (CCHPR, 2019).

Population size, sometimes perceived as too big and sometimes too small, and boundaries that did not respect the environment nor reflect natural communities, made it harder in some areas to bring communities together, particularly in the early stages of the programme. Time was spent trying to agree a shared identity or fair shares of funds between different parts of the area, rather than concentrating on the benefit that could be delivered to the area as a whole.

Local Trust's experience indicates that data should be the basis for area selection. The recommended approach would overlay the IMD with the Community Needs Index (CNI) which maps social infrastructure in neighbourhoods across the country. (The CNI defines 'social infrastructure' as community organisations and activity, places and spaces to meet, and connectivity – physical and digital.)

Care should also be taken in determining area boundaries to ensure an appropriate population size (6–8,000) and to respect existing physical boundaries and natural communities.

"Without Big Local, I'd be lost in the community. There would be nowhere for me to go ... They are setting up Birchfield Community Association, a charity that will continue its work. My hope is that I can be a part of that and continue with my passion as a youth worker. It is what I want to do in life. Big Local has given me the room to blossom in it."

Nyah, Birchfield Big Local

3. Develop infrastructure to support community leadership

The vital ingredient of the Big Local programme – and what makes it distinctive – is resident or community leadership. This has motivated people to become involved who had not previously engaged in voluntary or community activity: 20 per cent of the people on Big Local partnerships had not volunteered or engaged in community activity before (Local Trust survey of Big Local partnership members, 2022).

It also ensures that the activities, services and facilities that partnerships either develop or commission are carefully targeted to the needs of the neighbourhood – a factor likely to make them more effective.

Resident-led boards of volunteers need support to build their confidence and capacity right from the beginning of the programme. Local Trust's experience is that they need different levels and types of support as the programme progresses.

At the beginning, significant community development work in areas was crucial. Initially this was to establish the resident-led partnerships that develop and steer delivery of the programme locally, and then to support them in undertaking extensive community engagement and community research to formulate a plan for spending their award.

This support was provided initially by experienced freelance consultants, contracted to work around four days a month in Big Local areas. The role evolved over time; once partnerships and plans were established, these local 'reps' helped broker access to services and acted as a critical friend.

This function was eventually taken 'in house' by Local Trust. This was to assure quality and consistency and to secure a direct link between Big Local areas and the centre, ensuring local needs could be met quickly and effectively.



Once Big Local partnerships were established, there was a need to develop 'programme architecture' to support them. Initially at least, partnerships were unincorporated entities so they could not enter into grant agreements, contracts for services or employ workers. People who volunteered as partnership members may also have been reluctant to engage without the support of an organisation which would look after the administration associated with the funding.

For this reason, local accountable organisations, known as 'locally trusted organisations' (LTOs), were recruited to manage and account for expenditure. Often described initially as the 'banks' for Big Local areas, in many cases their role grew over time, including providing valuable advice and support to Big Local areas.

Other key elements of the support on offer include:

- National support partners who help on technical issues (for example, on acquiring assets) and access to new ideas and approaches.

- A learning and networking programme which brings Big Local areas together for action learning and peer support.

Peer support has been particularly valued by Big Local partnership members as a source both of inspiration and practical hints and tips.

In 2019, Local Trust developed the Community Leadership Academy (CLA) to identify and support established and emerging leaders in Big Local areas; enhance the delivery of the programme in their areas; and leave a legacy of more confident and better networked community leaders.

The CLA has increased the number of capable and engaged people at a local level, nurturing and retaining some of the most talented community leaders and advancing collective understanding of the support needed for individuals and groups leading change at a neighbourhood level.

Over time, support has become more bespoke and tailored to the needs of individual Big Local partnerships as their work has developed and the projects



they are seeking to deliver have become both larger in scale and more varied. Local Trust's experience illustrates the importance of a flexible approach to programme support, capable of adapting to the needs and aspirations of communities as they evolve and change over time.

“Local Trust gave me the chance to take part in the Community Leadership Academy. This is when I recognised my own strengths ... I have had the opportunity to meet some really amazing individuals who have supported me throughout my journey. I never wanted to say it before but I would say it now, I’m a good leader.”

Imrana Niazi, One Palfrey Big Local

4. Provide relatively small amounts of flexible funding, but – crucially – over the long term

The transfer of a 'spend out' endowment has been key to the success of the Big Local programme. This has insulated the programme from changes in policy or funding fashions and political whims; in turn, this has enabled fidelity to the original mission and ethos, and testing of the model over an extended period. It provided certainty of funding and enabled Local Trust, advised by investment managers, to maximise returns.

A 15-year budget, and an effective long-term investment strategy, allowed Local Trust to ride out any bumps or lulls in the market and increase the original investment of £217m to approximately £273m. This has enabled increased investment in Big Local areas (valuing £155k per area), additional programme support and work to secure the legacy of our research and learning.

The £1m investment awarded to each Big Local area is relatively small when spread over 10–15 years, amounting to approximately £10–£15 per resident per year.

However, Local Trust's experience is that this sum, adjusted to calculate for an equivalent current value, is sufficient to seed transformational change in areas and build the confidence and capacity of partnerships to raise other funding from a variety of sources to achieve their aspirations.

The long-term nature of the funding provided through Big Local is valuable in several ways. It:

- Enables residents to build individual and collective confidence and capacity (in some cases very new skills), which takes time and cannot be rushed.
- Enables areas to spend at a pace that makes sense to them, rather than being compelled to develop large projects before they have the necessary confidence and capacity.
- Is key to building strong relationships within and external to the community – this is particularly important in areas where there has been friction, as groups develop the confidence to navigate conflict with time and 'disagree well', and the confidence to resist others who seek to obstruct positive local change.
- Encourages areas to take a long-term view; it enables them to try things, to learn and to correct course, particularly important in instances where things have gone wrong, as they sometimes will.
- Builds trust and credibility with the wider community – there is real scepticism about interventions that are so short term that at the point that programmes are properly up and running and relationships established, they need to start winding down.

The scope to use the funding flexibly (as it isn't tied to particular sorts of projects or tightly defined outcomes) is also likely to have made a big difference to the success of Big Local partnerships. It has enabled them to do the work they knew – based on deep local knowledge – would be most likely to create positive change in their area.

“If we can't do it, we'll get help and we'll learn through taking a different approach ... What we have learned as a partnership is when your capacity grows, your confidence grows. And when your confidence grows, your capacity grows. It's been a learning experience and journey.”

George Hill, KHL Big Local

The scale of programme investment needed

Alongside the framework for distribution, consideration needs to be given to the amount of funding made available for a community wealth fund. The original endowment for the Big Local programme valued £217m (growing, with prudent investment, to £273m).

To run an equivalent programme today, offering the same buying power to areas and the same level of investment in confidence and capacity building, would cost around £400m (with areas receiving £1.7m each). This amount of funding is required to ensure that the programme is of sufficient scale – in terms of the number of benefiting communities and the scope and quality of the capacity-building programme – to realise the potential benefits of community leadership in improved outcomes.

A community wealth fund would need to provide funding of this scale in order to have transformative and sustained impact in the most deprived and 'left behind' neighbourhoods.

“I think that we've given people a voice. If they haven't wanted to talk about something themselves, we have enabled them or we have assisted them. We've put Townhill Park and Harefield on the map a little bit.”

Kim Ayling, SO18 Big Local

Conclusion

This paper summarises learning from the Big Local programme that might support the framework design of a community wealth fund. It distils the findings of significant research on the programme, as well as discussions with the Local Trust staff team as well as Big Local partnership members across the country. The aim is to inform the framework design of a community wealth fund.

Recommendations include:

- Establishing a new dedicated national delivery agency
- Setting clear criteria for identifying areas to benefit
- Developing flexible infrastructure to support community leadership
- Providing relatively small amounts of funding to each area (roughly £1.7m)
- Allowing them to spend it over a long period (10-15 years).

About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources, and decision-making into the hands of communities.

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding, and to draw on the learning from our work delivering the Big Local programme to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

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