Local Trust
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The relationship between money and community power in the Big Local programme

Executive summary

September 2024

Local Trust

About this executive summary

This executive summary accompanies the report 'The relationship between money and community power in the Big Local programme'. This research, conducted by Stop, Collaborate and Listen (SCL) Agency, presents the risks, challenges and opportunities experienced by Big Local areas when trying to use their £1.15 million of funding to grow community power.

Front cover: Partnership members and volunteers outside The Big Local Community Shop. Shadsworth and Whitebirk Big Local summer carnival August 2024 (Photo: Local Trust/Orrin Saint Pierre)

COMMUNITY FUND

Executive summary

Big Local is a resident-led programme that seeks to build capacity within history underfunded communities by transferring decision-making power and control over a financial resource, directly to residents. The 10-15-year programme (beginning in 2012 and concluding entirely by 2026) provided £1.15m in non-prescriptive funding to each of the 150 selected communities. It differs fundamentally from previous initiatives by avoiding the traditional route of channelling funds through local authorities or other organisations.

The research in this report, conducted by the Stop, Collaborate and Listen (SCL) Agency, examines the relationship between financial resources and community power within Big Local. It uses participatory and qualitative research, exploring to what extent the money serves both as a source and an enabler of community power. Power was examined at individual, organisational and sociopolitical levels.

Through this research, we have observed a web of interrelated components that explain how resources can generate and sustain community power. No one component on its own supported the transfer of power; rather, a systematic and ongoing effort to construct, maintain, and strengthen the web, while continuously cultivating connections between each component, was required. Understanding what these core components were, how they were supported or restricted, and how they could be further facilitated in the future, will help funders and designers of community-led programmes see the value and opportunities of non-prescriptive funding controlled by communities.

This research presents the risks, challenges and opportunities experienced by Big Local areas when trying to use the money to grow community power. Big Local partnerships have highlighted the importance of supporting the development of community-led infrastructure on which community power can thrive. This involves the consideration and navigation of context and recognising the crucial role that powerholders in local areas play, particularly in relinquishing control for the growth of community power.

Figure 1. Web of community power

2.
Money strengthens **community capacity** and power through investing in external support and learning by spending.

1.
When residents have control of money, existing **structural power imbalances** are made visible and become negotiable.

3.
Investing in the development of a **distinct and visible community identity** makes resident-led power visible and connected.

9.
Money plays a key role in establishing a legacy that will continue to **advance community power.**

4.
Financing **physical assets** serves as a base for community action, enabling connectedness and collective power to grow.

COMMUNITY POWER

8.
Using money to establish a **track record to successful community leadership** and delivery leads to a new enabling climate for engaging residents as agents of change.

5.
Investing in resilient, empowered and responsive **resident networks** empowers distributed leadership, amplifying the power of a collective community voice.

7.
Money helps **strengthen local connections and cohesion** between organisations, facilitating opportunities to exercise community power.

6.
Investing in **resident-led activities** enhances individual and collective capacity and agency and promotes ownership

This diagram – and in particular the key components (in bold) – shows how access to, and spending of, non-prescriptive funding, such as through the Big Local programme, can lead to and develop community power. These components are discussed in more detail within this report.

In what ways does money support community power?

Exposing community power structures

Introducing non-prescriptive funding to history underfunded communities exposed the less visible and often underlying power inequities that have historically restricted or currently restrict the development of community agency and power.

Some Big Local partnerships experienced early conflicts with certain people and organisations, ranging from public bodies and the voluntary sector to local influential people, and sometimes even community members with self-perceived power who saw the money as something that they and their causes could benefit from. These enactments of power showed how local power systems can often leave communities without control over decisions that impact their daily lives. Therefore, in our research, having money and engaging in conflicts with powerholders over its use was the first step in building a web of community power.

Powerholders' willingness to let go of control, and with that some privileges, significantly impacted partnerships' ability to advance their power. The intention behind the distribution of the Big Local funding is that it should serve as a catalyst for engaging and challenging local powerholders around relinquishing this control, or otherwise demonstrating a real

commitment to shared decision-making. After receiving the money, residents also began to understand the skills that would be needed to gain power for communities, such as negotiation, conflict management, consensus-building and resolution, and to invest in these.

Strengthening community capacity

The transfer of power to residents within Big Local hinged on the individual and collective development and distribution of skills, knowledge, and expertise. Communities' power or potential for it also relied on their ability to understand their limitations, and to address these using funds to buy in support. Consequently, the division of labour within and beyond partnerships is also an essential skill for enabling or restricting power.

As such, external paid support, consultants, and experts were considered by partnerships to be essential in navigating challenges, providing necessary skills, and aiding residents in moving projects forward while retaining control. Understanding and monitoring the intentions and motivations of these support mechanisms is crucial to ensure they enabled power for partnerships, rather than taking it for themselves. Additionally, paid workers and consultants needed to be aware of their own power and privilege in relation to the sometimes vulnerable communities they were working with, and take care not to overshadow resident-led initiatives.

What are the enablers to money developing community power?

Central to the success of community empowerment through Big Local funding has been strategic investment in what we have referred to as five key 'enablers' through time. Each of these enablers played a pivotal role in building a robust infrastructure through which community power could grow, flourish, and sustain itself. This intricate web of investments demonstrates that financial resources, when used creatively and strategically by communities, can catalyse a range of outcomes that collectively enhance community power.

A distinct community identity

By investing in a positive community identity, partnerships were able to attract and engage more community members, raise the awareness of Big Local, strengthen connections between fractured communities, visibly demonstrate the value of connected and active residents to outside organisations, and hold the partnerships accountable. All of these, especially together, were steps towards community empowerment.

Physical assets as bases of community action

Investing in assets helped community power flourish by creating welcoming spaces for residents to gather, plan, and run activities tailored to community needs. These spaces also made the success of resident-led projects more visible, and kept important community buildings open, ensuring groups had places to meet and

connect. Some areas helped reduce costs for small groups by using green or efficient energy for heating and electricity. During a time when local resources were scarce and costly to run, these investments showcased how funding could bring real benefits to communities through physical spaces that fostered connection, inspiration, and unity.

Empowered and responsive resident networks

The transfer of power to communities has become apparent by money being used to establish and strengthen networks of residents who are – or have been - actively and implicitly involved with Big Local. Resident networks included volunteers, activists, group or activity leaders, employees within community assets, residents who contributed to ideas and decision-making, associated community organisations and small groups, and partnership members.

Establishing strong resident networks created opportunities for members to contribute their ideas, share decision-making, be responsive to community needs and hold partnerships accountable. It also helped them develop social and cultural capital, and offered training, mentorship, and support in leadership, advocacy, public speaking, and other empowerment skills. By investing in ways to recognise resident contributions to change, and presenting meaningful engagement and consultation opportunities that were responsive to evolving community needs, residents were positioned within the programme as unique and powerful community mobilisers. When money was invested in resident networks, they had greater opportunities to shape decisions that affected them, access additional funding for their needs, gain employment or volunteering roles, and establish influential relationships with powerholders.

Multiple and varied activities

Our research showed that communities only developed power when they actively participated and engaged in work to make change in their area. With this in mind, investments in social and cultural activities and events helped create opportunities for residents to become more involved and engaged with Big Local. This in turn grew resident networks and facilitated community power. This approach offered residents the opportunity to promote ideas and turn them into actions, promoting learning and agency along the way. Through investing in activities, communities have developed a sense of ownership and power over what is needed in the area, resulting in their active involvement in decision-making processes and group leadership.

Alongside this, facilitating ongoing and timely resident-led consultation and distributed decision-making empowered communities to direct change in their own interests. Investing in strengthening the capacity of individuals and groups also gave residents the power to make positive changes in the community, and in general, working to improve community inclusion, cohesion, and integration helped encourage links with other assets and organisations in the area. Each of these areas of investment, especially together, helped foster community empowerment.

Strong connections and cohesion across local organisations

Big Local funding was used to identify and strengthen the connections and unity between local organisations – including charities, businesses, and public bodies – to promote community power in various ways. This included providing support and resources for the development and networking of new and existing community groups and organisations that promoted community growth and empowered people to live better. Hosting and facilitating joined-up events and activities helped to enhance harmony between and among local organisations and residents, leading to opportunities for the community to influence and make decisions regarding the use of local resources. Having money also secured community voices on decision-making boards within local businesses or development enterprises. However, in some cases, there were large organisations or developments in the area that could not be influenced by residents, highlighting the limitations of what £1.15 million could achieve in terms of community power.

Money's relationship to power: the journey over time

Establishing a track record of success

Money played a key role in developing a strong reputation of success in Big Local areas, which helped communities gain power and capitalise on their gains. The approach to building a track record of success varied depending on the context, partnership governance, decision-making, and motivations in each area.

Grant-giving has generally been an effective way for partnerships to demonstrate the community's capacity to make a difference, especially when the grants had a clear purpose and were aligned with a long-term shared vision. Larger projects also served to create a solid track record of tangible outcomes for residents and powerholders.

Whatever form it took, having a track record of success often helped partnerships secure significant additional investment, which could help create sustainable longer-term outcomes and impacts. As partnership's reputations grew throughout Big Local, power imbalances shifted, and residents were better able to demonstrate their power to lead and make changes to the places they lived. Without the resources to expose power imbalances, strengthen capacity, and build enablers of power, residents would have been limited in their ability to demonstrate their power and create positive change in their communities.

Community power when the Big Local funding is spent

The legacy of community power after Big Local will reflect the strengths and limitations of context, relationships, power structures and shifts of power achieved throughout the programme. The future aspirations of partnerships and residents for community-led action, and the timing of implementing that vision, will also have an impact on the continuation of community power.

To ensure power continues beyond Big Local, it is crucial to have a well-designed and effective mechanism in place to secure and attract additional funding, and to embed community leadership into existing and new power structures. The level of funding secured, and how prescriptive it is, will also be key factors in securing ongoing community leadership.

Therefore, the funding ecosystem must prioritise community-led infrastructure moving forward, and work diligently to create a sustainable and community-driven approach to development. How the money is spent within legacy projects will play a key role in this process.

Conclusion

Our research indicates that money can enable power in communities when it is used to create an interlinked web of community empowerment components that can support residents to have influence and control over resources and decisions that affect their lives. In Big Local, the relationship between money and community power changed over time, evolving from an initial struggle for control to a stage where money became a tool for sustained community empowerment. Successful spending generates an evidence base of resident-led change, leading to a shift in perceptions and creating an enabling climate for engaging residents in change.

The non-prescriptive nature of Big Local funding has been key to building community power over time, as it opens spaces of discovery and allows communities to be responsive and active participants in controlling the forces and resources that affect them. This would not be possible without the extended timeline of Big Local as the web of community power takes time to construct and emerge before becoming resilient.

The caveat to the above is that the relationship between money and community power exists on a continuum towards an ideal goal and is not linear. The extent to which any partnership achieves any combination of the above processes will vary depending on the context, purpose, and people involved. Not all partnerships will experience each of the above processes, or they may look different. What is clear, however, is the need for a holistic approach to building and sustaining community power.

This report draws on findings gathered from Big Local areas to provide valuable insights for funders. It stresses the need for flexible funding approaches; attention to the dynamics of external support; and a focus on building sustained community power through investment in community identity, physical assets, resident networks, interconnected organisations, and multiple activities, leading to a successful track record to demonstrate the value of community power.

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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The SCL Agency specialises in providing high-quality research and evaluation services using co-production approaches and methods to ensure that people can participate in ways that work for them. This collaborative approach helps ensure their work is relevant, impactful, and genuinely reflects the voices of those involved

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