

Building Big Local Futures: Building systems of community connection and control (Paper 1)

Our Bigger Story: The longitudinal multimedia
evaluation of the Big Local programme

Big Local is a resident-led funding programme providing people in 150 areas in England with £1.15m each to spend across 10-15 years to create lasting change in their neighbourhoods. The programme is run by place-based funder Local Trust, who believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of local communities, to enable them to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live.

Our Bigger Story is a longitudinal multi-media evaluation that runs alongside Big Local, charting the stories of change in 15 different Big Local areas to draw learning about the programme as a whole. Previous reports, along with photos and films to illustrate the journeys of Big Local partnerships are available on a dedicated website, [Our Bigger Story](#).

Acknowledgements

Big Local study areas:

- Barrowcliff
- Birchfield
- Blackpool Revoe (referred to as Revoe in this report)
- Bountagu (Bounces-Montagu)
- Catton Grove
- Grassland Hasmoor
- Growing Together (Northampton East)
- Hanwell, Copley Close
- Lawrence Weston
- Northfleet North
- Radstock and Westfield
- Ramsey
- Three Parishes
- Westfield Estate
- Whitley Bay

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An Our Bigger Story film,
[Building Community Power: the role of the Big Local programme,](#)
accompanies this report

1. Summary

The underlying **premise of the Big Local programme** is that long term funding and support to build capacity enables residents to take decisions and to act to create positive and lasting change in their communities. To achieve this, the programme provides £1.15m to 150 areas in England to spend across 10–15 years plus additional support. The evaluation of the programme, [Our Bigger Story](#), has been charting the progress of 15 of those areas since 2015 as they seek to improve their neighbourhoods.

This paper focuses on what **building community power** might look like, particularly in terms of plans for creating a community-led infrastructure of connections and control over resources beyond the Big Local programme. It is one of two papers examining the extent to which, by the end of 2021, residents have used their Big Local resources and support as a catalyst to foster and create a sustained impact. The companion paper looks at Big Local legacies around physical and social infrastructure.

Here we ask specifically whether there is something **qualitatively different about community power built through the approach in the Big Local programme** compared with previous community development and regeneration programmes.

In doing so, we draw **three key conclusions** from the experience of Big Local to date:

1. More powerful communities can arise from a combination of four features of Big Local activities: the development of agency, of organisation, of effective relationships, and the resources of money and time.

Although the approach undertaken in Big Local areas varies considerably, all are seeking to work towards a resident-led vision, guided by a community plan, for how their area can be a better place to live. In this context a **powerful community** is regarded as one which is, among other things, resident-led and from the

grassroots, able to debate different ideas but come to a common conclusion, proactive and empowered to make change, open, inclusive and welcoming, and having a voice that is heard.

To achieve this, we have observed how personal **agency**, in terms of self-esteem, confidence and skills, has expanded, along with the capacity to understand and make decisions to address complex issues, and to support groups of residents to come together around a common interest or cause. Powerful communities have also built **organisation** in terms of community connections and networks and the creation of organisational governance structures through which the resident-led vision can be sustained. They do not work in isolation but through the establishment of **effective relationships** which narrow the divide between residents and other significant agencies and institutions with a remit, authority and resources to work in the area. This was brought to the fore in the experience of community responses to COVID-19. Powerful communities have been boosted by the flexible way in which financial resources have supported their efforts: the **resources of money and time** have generated a wider sense of value and efficacy to Big Local partnerships, beyond what it could fund directly, in terms of conferring legitimacy, opening doors and leveraging other resources to support more ambitious plans.

2. Community-led change, the intended outcome of resident-led decision making, can be facilitated by effective community-led infrastructure, but its development has been varied across Big Local.

The significance of developing agency, organisation, effective relationships and the flexible use of resources is captured in the concept of **community-led infrastructure**. This is a place-based concept with **two key dimensions**: first, it is focused on the **whole geographical community**, and second, it is defined by **community ownership and control**. It operates at community level, but it is more than just instigating community activities:

it is controlled and driven by the community, setting and pursuing its own priorities.

In practice, the extent to which Our Bigger Story case study areas have succeeded in pursuing a 'whole-place' approach varies. While many of the areas have a distinct geographical identity, such as a single definable housing estate or two neighbouring villages, they have not all succeeded in reaching out equally across the patch. Likewise, in most Big Local areas there is a desire for greater community ownership and control, but a recognition that it takes time to build. While there are good examples of community-owned strategies in operation, it is only in the last couple of years in some areas that ownership and leadership has broadened beyond the work of a few key activists.

3. Through community-led infrastructure, the Big Local programme appears to have supported a qualitatively different approach to investing in community-based initiatives, although its potential is only just being realised in some areas.

Community-led infrastructure involves a wide **array of functions and activities**, including, for example, researching and understanding needs and challenges, listening to and valuing different voices, identifying priorities for action, creating community leadership and greater co-ordination between groups. Pursued well, it results in, amongst other things, credible resident-led structures, connected networks of residents, effective relationships with agencies and strengthened resident voice and influence.

All Big Local areas have been pursuing some of these activities, but it is perhaps only in a **handful of areas** that credible community-led infrastructure that has the potential to be long lasting has been built. These Big Locals appear to be focused on community change, have a visible presence in the community and create wider community 'buy in', are planning pro-actively and for the long-term, have built

strategic networks and alliances, and show an early emphasis on building future and sustainable community-led organisation and structures. These areas highlight the possibilities for community-led infrastructure, and stand, in different ways, as **exemplars of community power** in action.

We conclude by considering how the **learning from Big Local can be embedded** into wider policy and practice. Insights and learning from earlier area-based and community initiatives has been hard to gain but easily forgotten. The Big Local programme appears to be generating useable insight into **what works in improving neighbourhoods and communities**, without losing sight of its nuances, contradictions, struggles and complexities.

2. Introduction to Building Big Local Futures

Big Local is a resident-led funding programme providing people in 150 areas in England with £1.15m each to spend across 10–15 years to create lasting change in their neighbourhoods. In 2015, the Third Sector Research Centre at the University of Birmingham was commissioned to evaluate the Big Local programme through a case study approach. Working with 15 Big Local areas, the [Our Bigger Story](#) evaluation is charting their stories and documenting change as it happens, primarily through [reports and film](#).

The premise of the Big Local programme is outlined as a hypothesis in the Local Trust 2020–2026 research [strategy](#), which claims that:

Long term funding and support to build capacity gives residents in hyper-local areas agency to take decisions and to act to create positive and lasting change.

Inherent in this is an understanding that when communities are supported to make decisions about where they live, the results have the potential to be resident driven, locally relevant and long lasting – that is, sustained beyond the Big local funding stream. Correspondingly, people in 150 Big Local areas across England are working to make a difference in their communities, to make their areas even better places to live.

These ambitions align with the current direction of government policy: that communities should be supported to thrive and be great places in which to live and work (DLUHC, 2021). How the government intends for this to happen, however, is not really spelt out. It is also not a new agenda – we have seen progressive roll outs of programmes targeting economically challenged neighbourhoods over the last 50 years or so.

What is new, however, is a renewed enthusiasm in the idea of ‘community power’, as evidenced by more than 450 voluntary, community, public and private sector organisations who have signed up to the Community Wealth Fund Alliance which proposes a funding strategy to enable community-led change. Moreover, since the pandemic started in Spring 2020, there has been greater appreciation of the apparent capacity of communities to respond appropriately and effectively to the crisis. This has been reflected in a plethora of reports and initiatives asserting the value and benefits of community power, such as from New Local, who state “*Community power is an idea whose time has come*” (Pollard et al, 2021, p.7) and the recently launched [We’re Right Here](#) campaign. Based on the principle that people should have the power to shape the places where they live, the campaign is calling for a Community Power Act to ensure the right of local communities to make decisions about services and spaces at the most local level possible.

So, what insight and learning can the Big local programme offer to these visions of community control? *Building Big Local Futures* aims to use material from the evaluation to explore how Big Local areas are thinking ahead and what futures are now being considered as the programme gets nearer to the end. It comprises two papers around succession and legacy, both pertinent themes as partnerships start to spend up their Big Local funding. In these papers we examine the extent to which residents have used programme money and support as a starting block to foster and create a sustained impact.

The following sections of the current report, *Building systems of community connection and control*, explore:

- Community-led visions and the key features that contribute to building powerful communities (Section 3)
- Community-led change; the focus, level and function, the location of ownership and control, and likely future structures based on evidence to date (Section 4)
- Reflections on the concept of community-led infrastructure; functions and outcomes, enablers and obstacles, potential and limitations, including learning for policy and practice (Section 5)

The report concludes with thoughts around balancing optimism with realism, and some key questions to inform further evaluation activity (Section 6).

3. Building systems of community connection and control

Ten years since the Big Local programme began in 2011, Our Bigger Story is drawing on reflective learning conversations from 2020 and 2021 to assess the agency and organisation that is being built at community level, and the extent to which it has the potential to deliver resident-led change. As well as great variation across Big Local areas, it is important to understand that change is not a progressive linear upward journey to community power, but more a messy picture of ebbs, flows and cycles along with shifts in the local context – in people, in organisations and in policy.

In the sections below, we look first at community-led visions. Here we explore the extent to which Big Local partnerships are taking decisions which lead to the outcome of an even better place to live and the building of more powerful communities currently and for the future. Evidence from the evaluation suggests that there are four key features of powerful communities – development of agency, development of organisation, effective relationships within communities and with external agencies, and resources (money and time). In section 5, we explore whether there is something qualitatively different about community power built through the approach in the Big Local programme compared with previous community development and regeneration programmes. We address how and whether a key legacy of Big Local is the creation of community agency and infrastructure, given that previous evaluations of area-based initiatives have tended largely to focus on legacy in terms of physical dimensions of change such as improved housing stock or social infrastructure development (Batty et al, 2010).

Community-led vision

Ultimately, Big Local partnerships are aiming to achieve four broad outcomes¹ as set out in the original [programme aims and objectives](#), namely:

- communities will be better able to identify local needs and take action in response to them
- people will have increased skills and confidence, so that they continue to identify and respond to needs in the future
- the community will make a difference to the needs it prioritises
- people will feel that their area is an even better place to live.

There are practical mechanisms within the programme in order to help realise these aims. All Big Local partnerships produced an original community plan, which has then been updated on a regular basis. These plans are intended to frame the changes residents would like to see through an understanding of the local context, such as demographic information around who lives in the area, indicators around health, crime, education, and how people see and feel about their community. Residents are involved in discussions about what they would like to see change, and ambitions are articulated through a vision for the area - what the area should look and feel like by the end of the programme if Big Local has worked.

The Barrowcliff Big Local vision, for example, is that the area should be: 'A safe, clean and attractive neighbourhood that people are proud of and where everyone has the best possible chances in life'; for Revoe the vision is 'an empowered community that is able to help itself'. For Lawrence Weston, the vision of a place where people 'of all ages can live happy, healthy and fulfilling lives' is underpinned by the principle that 'residents [are] in the driving seat to inform design and long-term management'.

Alongside the vision, Big Local partnerships identify themes and priorities for the coming years

¹ Throughout the Our Bigger Story (OBS) evaluation, over 100 films about the activities have been made in addition to the text, photo and podcast entries on the 15 OBS location pages. These are tagged against the four broad outcomes and most are seen to be about, and achieving, making a difference to prioritised community needs.

and an accompanying costed action plan. While many of the themes are similar, for example, more employment opportunities, enhanced play spaces and activities for children and young people, and building a more vibrant community, the actions or pathways to achieving these are very different across Big Local areas. Some Big Local partnerships have paid workers to help deliver the activity, others rely primarily on volunteers and working groups. Some have small grants programmes for community groups, others commission services often provided by external agencies. Some try to influence other fund holders and institutions to shape more appropriate services or attract additional resources for their communities. Several Big Local partnerships have a mix of all of these.

The extent to which some of this activity is sustainable beyond Big Local financial and worker support is questionable though, based on what we know at this stage in the programme. The evidence around potential sustainability is perhaps even weaker in areas that, because of an historic context of poor access to local services, have gone down the route of commissioning services from existing/larger voluntary agencies with less emphasis on capacity building or small grants for grassroots groups.

The practical mechanisms of plans, themes, organising resources and running activities are the visible manifestations of Big Local. Threaded through this, however, are the slightly less tangible but critical processes of building community connections and creating community power.

Building more powerful communities

It has been argued that the building blocks of civil society, such as mutuality, cooperation, association and connection are built at the local level (Hambleton, 2020, p.57). It is also recognised however, that '*civil society is highly fragmented – a place of conflict and competition, as much as resolution*' (Taylor, 2011, p.77). These understandings of civil society hold much resonance for Big Local communities which have been tasked with forming resident-led partnerships reflective of the whole community which will listen to local people's needs and desires and then drive change with them, or on their behalf. How have Big Local partnerships

fared in this respect; and specifically, to what extent have they contributed to building 'agency to take decisions and to act to create positive and lasting change' (Local Trust research strategy, *ibid*), and have they built more powerful communities?

Participants from Our Bigger Story Big Local areas at a residential event in September 2021 suggested that a powerful community brings everyone together while acknowledging their differences, and consists of the elements summarised in Table 1 below:

Table 1
Elements of a powerful community

Being bottom-up

- Resident-led
- Born of the grassroots

Being inclusive

- Able to debate different ideas but come to a common conclusion
- Accepting
- Collaborative
- Working to common goals
- Groups working together for the benefit of the community, tackling challenges together
- Mutually cooperative
- A community that listens
- Welcoming
- Caring

Being accessible

- Communication – using appropriate, effective, understandable language
- Open and transparent

Being innovative and adaptable

- Able to think outside of the box – readjust as necessary
- Acting both reactively and proactively

Having capabilities

- Empowered to make change
- Confident
- Having a voice that is heard
- Capacity to influence
- Having the resources, skills and knowledge to make change

Significantly, participants have also referred to taking a non-partisan approach. At the same residential event, people talked about taking control of their future for non-political gain. Separately, a resident described how the Big Local partnership works from a *'collective non-power base ... we don't have a 'P' in our politics at all'*. This person went on to say that from their experience this is not the case for other groups in the area where ideas and suggestions are rejected simply because of who they come from or are associated with.

We have observed four key features in Big Local activities that potentially contribute to a more powerful community. These are:

- a. Development of agency
- b. Development of organisation
- c. Effective relationships
- d. Resources - money and time.

a. Development of agency

Agency usually refers to the idea that individuals can think, act and make a meaningful difference to their lives (Connor, 2011). Working directly with people who want to make a difference to their community and their local area, and building their confidence and capacity is at the heart of the Big Local approach.

There is evidence from across the 15 areas that **personal agency** has been developing in a number of ways. Firstly, there are multiple cases where residents new to community action have built their personal skills and self-confidence.

Secondly, there are the examples of people accessing Big Local services and activities which have had a positive impact on their self-esteem and life opportunities, such as those accessing Big Local supported job clubs and life skills support (seen in, e.g., Barrowcliff and Revoe) that have moved on to employment, training or education. As a Big Local worker stressed:

"Don't forget the impact we have had on individuals who have moved on from being volunteers into work".




Thirdly, there are many partnership members who have built the capacity to address complex issues and developed associated decision making and management skills. In discussion with members of several Big Local partnerships, there were many examples of how they had seen people transformed through their involvement in local activities, several of whom had gone on to take up positions of responsibility within and outside the Big Local partnership.

Big Local partnership members have to grapple with understanding the profile of their area, prioritising needs, creating a budgeted plan and commissioning services. This is only the start. The need to learn about managing and dealing with complexity is particularly apparent and evidenced in the big capital projects taken on by some Big Local partnerships, such as community hubs (for example in Grassland Hasmoor, Ramsey and Lawrence Weston). Partnership members have also talked about how they had had to get to grips with understanding charity law and the tax implications of different structures, develop joint venture agreements, and to create a Community Interest Company (CIC) or a Charity Incorporated Organisation (CIO).

In every OBS area, there is evidence of more community activity and of more **community groups** as a result of Big Local, though the reach, range and scale of this varies. Big Local partnerships have been successful in supporting the establishment, development, connection and longevity of groups of residents who together have created change, whether that to be around pursuing common interests (e.g. improving park and green spaces in Catton Grove and [Westfield](#)), providing a much needed service (e.g. youth provision in Hanwell and Bountagu,) and developing community and social enterprises (e.g. in Three Parishes).

There is evidence across the evaluation study areas that small grants and/or basic community work support has stimulated new groups, enabled existing community groups to develop and extend their activities, or keep activity going at points of financial challenge. In addition, in some areas (e.g., Grassland Hasmoor, Ramsey) the Big Local grant application processes have supported groups to

Table 2
Examples of community group support

 New groups	 Extended activities	 Keeping groups going
<p>Northfleet Big Local has offered 10 weeks rent money to new groups to help get them started.</p> <p>Ramsey Million has provided seed funding and development worker support to launch a whole array of groups e.g., toddler and youth groups, heritage projects, a club for adults with learning disabilities</p>	<p>The Growing Together small grants pot supported the development of Silhouette young people’s drama group, which has now successfully applied for longer term substantial funding, and supported sustainable youth provision through its larger grants pot:</p> <p><i>“Growing Together believes that its investment in communities has developed a significant legacy of new and strengthened organisations”</i> (Growing Together Northampton, 2020, p. 44).</p> <p>Radstock and Westfield Big Local has supported existing groups to develop their activities through an annual ‘Dragons Den’ grant process; two groups in receipt of grants at the start of the pandemic have gone on to become constituted and secure other funding.</p>	<p>Barrowcliff Big Local has financially supported a local community centre faced with small grants to help keep it financially viable</p> <p>Lawrence Weston Big Local gave an elders community group a bridging grant to cover difficulties with cash flow</p>

develop fundraising and monitoring skills which they are already using to apply to other funders and will help to sustain activities well into the future.

b. Development of organisation

Beyond the development of agency, there is the development of organisation. There are two aspects to this — the making of community connections and networks and the creation of organisational governance structures which will supersede, or sustain, Big Local partnerships and their vision beyond the end date of programme funding.

Community connections refers to relationship building between residents and between community groups. Groups are stronger when they have respect for each other and where people can stand together when necessary:

“So, we’ve got this situation (COVID-19) where we all could have done something but it [network development] enabled us to be greater than the sum of our parts...and have more impact” (partnership member).

At the OBS residential event in 2021, there was agreement that Big Local partnerships are

providing many of the links and the networks that make their communities work. Examples include:

Support for the creation of a network of previously fractious heritage groups in Ramsey who now work together for mutual benefit but also for the benefit of the town and its traders through regular tourism days

The facilitation of weekly meetings for neighbourhood-based groups and service providers in Barrowcliff which came into their own during the pandemic through weekly online ‘Brew with the Crew’ meetings to share local knowledge and coordinate neighbourhood responses during the pandemic

The creation of Neighbourhood Forums to design, oversee delivery of and adherence to neighbourhood plans in the Growing Together and Lawrence Weston areas, as legislated in the 2010 Localism Act. This has enabled Growing Together to influence the location of a pharmacy and, in both areas, the building of a housing development.

The development of thematic working groups in Grassland Hasmoor Big Local which have become resident-led and constituted entities in their own right. This approach has enabled the groups to network and form relationships and associations which are held by group members independently (though with support) of the Big Local partnership around specific priorities such as the [environment](#) or food poverty.

Investment in time and resources to support networks of resident-led social and community enterprises in Three Parishes and in Birchfield. In Birchfield, around 36 social enterprises have emerged (mainly health and wellbeing focused) and a core group of eight have formed a consortium to scale up and bid for contracts.

Perhaps the most telling evidence of community connection through Big Local is the role that many partnerships played during the pandemic (McCabe et al, 2020, 2021). In numerous OBS areas, it was the Big Local initiative that stepped up not only to deliver but to coordinate a local response²:

“The board have been the driving force throughout COVID. This is what Big Local is all about. Showing the community what can be done, not just in ordinary circumstances, but in extraordinary circumstances. ... it is Big Local that has risen to the bar and to the occasion” (partnership member).

Big Local partnerships in several areas have gained a much more prominent role as a result of their response – from greater legitimacy amongst residents to positive perceptions by external agencies. In many respects it was not just that Big Local partnerships responded but the way that they did so – ways that have built pools of volunteers and strengthened community organisation. In Radstock and Westfield for example, two groups that received grants from Big Local at the start of COVID-19 have gone on to become constituted and secure other funding. In Whitley Bay, the Big Local contribution to coordinating a food response for homeless and vulnerable people has helped create a new social enterprise, whilst in Birchfield a consortium of social enterprises has been supported to address the underlying health conditions highlighted by the pandemic. In Ramsey, models of collaboration built through responses to the pandemic have been positively tested in practice again, when a flooding crisis in late 2020 required another whole community response. The mayor of Ramsey Town Council has remarked on how Ramsey Million and its LTO, Ramsey Neighbourhood Trust, were able to use their connections and volunteers to quickly deal with the impact of the flooding on residents, set up a flood relief group and administer a relief fund:

“All the learning from working together [during COVID-19] came together when the floods happened at Christmas”.

2 For more details see the series of research briefings on communities responding to COVID-19: <https://localtrust.org.uk/insights/research-communities-responding-to-covid-19/>

Community governance is the second aspect of the development of organisation through Big Local. All Big Local areas are required to have a partnership with a majority (at least 51%) of members who live in the Big Local area. Local Trust has invested much time and money in supporting effective community governance through support from a dedicated Big Local rep³, training, networking events, assistance with conflict resolution and mediation, and guidance materials.

At the start of the programme, these partnerships were not intended to be legal entities and were deliberately freed from a substantial amount of the bureaucracy associated with managing money and some of the responsibilities that might be associated with being a charitable trustee. They were, however, tasked with being reflective of the community and inclusive of community interests, outward looking and outcomes focused, operating in an open and transparent way, and embodying Big Local values and ethos.

They have all established an identity in their own communities. However, they have different structures – some have sub-groups, others have working groups, some have neither; they have different views on membership. There are those that are residents only whilst others have paid workers and external stakeholders involved in voting and/or non-voting roles. They have different approaches to delivering Big Local – some are active themselves, some commission services and many have a mixed approach.

There are examples of partnerships that have struggled at times. These might be related to challenges around keeping people engaged and actively involved in the partnership, getting bogged down in day-to-day operational management and losing sight of the bigger vision, or connected to conflict between partnership members or between the partnership and the locally trusted organisation⁴ (LTO) for example. Nevertheless, all 15 OBS areas have created and sustained a functioning partnership, many of these comprising people who had never acted in community

leadership roles previously. One partnership in particular, Grassland Hasmoor, has been very successful in broadening out opportunities for local leadership through setting up thematic working groups which have been constituted in their own right to build ownership, nurture new residents in community roles and broaden out the power base beyond the partnership.

As the Big Local programme draws to a close, we are seeing many Big Local partnerships forming new, or building upon existing, legal entities in order to carry forward resident-led community organisation. [Building on Local](#) (McCabe et al, 2021) outlined the different approaches to long term governance that were beginning to surface during 2020. These governance legacies seek to continue the Big Local approach with all the skills and experience gained over the last 10 years – community engagement and mobilising, identification of community needs, community planning, funding development etc. These emerging community structures are further explored in section 4.

c. Relationships with agencies and other resource holders

Agency at hyper-local level can be a problematic concept insofar as it underpins an assumption that change making can straightforwardly surmount institutional, cultural and structural barriers. People can have all the will in the world to create change but are often thwarted by wider forces and circumstances, such as bureaucratic ways of working, stereotypical assumptions and inequalities of status, power and resources. Yet, as we have seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, working with other stakeholders to respond in a timely and appropriate manner has proved beneficial to communities. Related research on community responses to COVID-19 pointed to the value of consistent and collaborative approaches to working together across organisational boundaries and the effectiveness of a trust based and ‘relational’ approach in building more powerful communities, (Macmillan, 2021; McCabe et al, 2022; Wilson et al, 2021).

3 Big Local reps are individuals appointed by Local Trust to offer tailored support to a Big Local area and to share successes, challenges and news.

4 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.

Linked to this effective working is the narrowing of a division between residents and the organisations and institutions already perceived to have control, particularly where people are using their Big Local experience to take on civic activities. For example, in Ramsey three people with Big Local experience now serve on the Town Council, while in Northfleet two people have become district councillors.

There is a mixed pattern of relationships with external agencies across the 15 areas and they are far from straightforward. For example, in some Big Local areas there is fruitful partnership with one council department but not another; in some places relationships are strong with council members but weak with key officers, and vice versa; some Big Local partnerships have particularly strong relationships with voluntary sector infrastructure bodies, in some these barely exist. What we have seen however, is that many of the community outcomes achieved result from Big Local participants having:

1. identified connections with others based on mutually held objectives,
2. invested time in understanding where and how decisions are made, and
3. developed relationships with resource holders which are facilitative in nature, i.e., they offer knowledge, time and/or money and are solution focused.

Examples include Grassland Hasmoor which has worked with numerous organisations and several local authorities to improve use of green space. Ramsey Million Partnership provides another example – it delivers for both the community and the council’s economic strategy through its town centre activities. Similarly, Barrowcliff successfully brought together a wide array of groups and agencies to [clean up the estate](#). A final example is Lawrence Weston which has been proactive in developing green energy initiatives in line with Bristol council’s carbon reduction policies. Together, these and other examples from across Big Local highlight how

the experience of working through Big Local can enable effective working relationships with agencies and other resource holders to be built, to the advantage of local communities.

d. Resources: money and time

For many people, money was the starting point for engaging with Big Local, despite the emphasis from the outset from programme managers and Big Local reps that ‘it is not about the money’. Some have rued the day that they put money in the title of their Big Local partnership (such as Ramsey Million), feeling that this has got in the way of the overall purpose of Big Local. As one Big Local worker put it:

“The fact is, if we’re honest, a lot of the partnership members joined up because they thought they could get some money for their organisation”.

However, many partnership members have talked since about how they came to understand that Big Local was about something bigger and more ambitious than one off grants to community groups, and they stayed involved. Echoing a journal article from an external evaluation of Big Local (Townsend et al, 2020), the money gave partnership members a sense of their own worth, a sense of power and efficacy, and when at the table with other agencies they were perhaps no longer to be seen as the poor relation. They could fund many of their ideas and they could match fund larger more costly projects:

“Money gave us the confidence and opened the doors for us. We had kudos, could go and knock-on doors and say we are serious. In it for 10 years” (resident).

This confidence, combined with the knowledge that the money did not have to be spent immediately, has enabled many Big Local partnerships to use their resources to bring in further funds. At least a third of the OBS areas have increased the £1.15 million from Big Local by at least 50%. Allied to the flexible use of money, therefore, has been a flexible amount of time in which to use it, as noted by a partnership member:

“[It made] an enormous difference, having the time, because you need time to prepare something, you need time to decide what to do, you need time to actually set it up and then you need at least a couple of years to get it going, so that you can then turn round and say it’s a success, it’s not a success, or, perhaps we ought to try this, perhaps we ought to try that. I mean, time is the most valuable thing that you’ve got when you’re doing something like this, because you know, a one-off is fine, anyone can do a one-off, but actually making something work, make it sustainable, make it useful, make it successful, takes time. And the one thing that the 10 years’ money has given us is that time”.

Taking all these examples of building powerful communities, under the four themes of agency, organisation, relationships and resources, we are left with a question around whether there is something distinctive about Big Local and its approach and ethos in creating not just more groups or activities or even community plans, but systems that connect, influence and exert community control over local development and change.

4. Community-led change

Community-led change is the intended outcome of resident-led decision making. It results from the development of agency, organisation, effective working relationships and flexible use of resources. In research focusing on the pandemic, Macmillan (2020) and Wilson et al (2020) attempted to make sense of what was making a substantive difference to responses to COVID-19 in some communities. It was suggested that networks of residents, community leadership, trust, relationships with agencies, and access to money, could be understood as **community-led infrastructure**. This is a place-based concept which is focused on the whole geographical community rather than a single group and is defined by community ownership and control. It does not operate in isolation from other types of infrastructure such as social infrastructure or the wider work of local voluntary sector infrastructure organisations, but it brings additional dimensions. The concept of community-led infrastructure is outlined below and used as a framework to explore and understand what is happening in Big Local communities and what this means in terms of succession and legacy.

Community focus, level and function

The first significant feature of community-led infrastructure is that of a whole and place-based community approach which **operates at the community level** through community action:

“It brings ordinary people together in everyday settings to work on mutually agreed priorities and projects. It has a focus on ‘us’, being ‘the community’ as a whole locale or group. It tilts towards informal organising, unpaid effort, and tends to avoid the hierarchical trappings of managerial or professional structures, in favour of more egalitarian and distributed forms” (Macmillan, 2020).

Big Local is a place-based programme and the focus on ‘us’ as a community taking action is strong. As one partnership member put it: *“the thing that links us together is the mutual desire to see transformation in our community.*

That’s what draws us together”. The process of creating community visions and related plans, as described above in section 3, was very much about improving local knowledge regarding what was actually happening at a community level, what change residents wanted to see and how this might happen. Existing collective identities, even if not explicitly expressed, such as feeling left behind, forgotten, and/or rurally isolated informed visions for a more positive future.

The extent to which Our Bigger Story case study areas have succeeded in pursuing a ‘whole-place’ approach varies. While many of the areas have a distinct geographical identity, such as a single definable housing estate or two neighbouring villages, they have not all succeeded in reaching out equally across the patch. Indeed, all the Big Local partnerships have at some time or another articulated frustrations about lack of engagement with sections of the community. This might be, for example, a specific housing estate, the streets furthest away from a community hub or on the other side of a major road, or particular age groups or minority ethnic communities. Patchy engagement has been exacerbated where a Big Local area is not consistent with existing administrative boundaries – at ward or even local authority levels – which typically frame local public services and political activity. Most, however, have tried to overcome these challenges. Those Big Local areas that include more than one neighbourhood or village have monitored and reviewed their engagement, activities and where they spend their resources all the way through the programme. They have also tried to ensure the partnership is reflective of the whole area: *“[We] want a big team, not just ... three or four people around a table, [we] want significant numbers from each village so you do have that representation”* (resident). In addition, learning gained through the pandemic has increased awareness of needs across communities and, in a few areas, there has been a recognition that greater outreach work e.g., through door knocking, can reach people who were previously not engaged.

There are many examples of Big Local partnerships creating change through their own voluntary based actions, with and without paid worker support. Community events in the Bountagu Big Local area during 2021 have been entirely organised by residents working in an unpaid capacity; Revoe residents run children and young people's activities; in the Growing Together area participants have kept their older people's clubs going; and Radstock and Westfield has prioritised funding community groups with small grants to cover basic running costs and thereby remain active. Grassland Hasmoor records the number of voluntary hours contributed by residents on a monthly basis – in August 2021 alone this amounted to 854 hours of voluntary time. In several areas, paid workers are themselves local residents. There are also examples of residents taking up Big Local training offers so that they can be paid for work they do in their own community and ensure that skills remain locally available, such as the 20 residents (mostly young people themselves) trained to work with young people in Ramsey.

Improving local intelligence about the array of community activity going on, and seeking to coordinate or connect this up, has been a priority for many Big Local partnerships. It appears to be a key community level function. Several Big Locals describe themselves as the community sign-posters and networkers, linking people together. Growing Together partnership members have talked about the heightened local knowledge that came from sitting round the table with a myriad of community groups applying for grants and the follow up connections they made. In other areas, there has been a conscious effort to bring groups together – as in Birchfield, where the Big Local partnership has supported the development of a Black and minority ethnic-led social enterprise consortium. A Big Local worker from another area commented that: *“It's about making those connections and making other organisations in the area aware of each other and what we can offer each other”*. For some there is an emphasis on more cross-referral between formal organisations in and around a locality: *“a network of agencies to refer to and cross refer”* (Big Local worker). In Ramsey, the Town Council and community groups are pulling together more and are working

strategically to make sure Ramsey does not miss out when new funding opportunities arise. This leads us beyond the pragmatic considerations of improved collaboration between groups at the local level, to something more strategic about community-led infrastructure. It becomes part of a discussion about how communities are increasingly in control of resources, asserting their power and influencing change in their area.

Community ownership, control and influence

The second dimension of community-led infrastructure is about community priorities and actions, where power resides with residents. It takes account of wider social, political and economic structures and the role of the community as proactive, creative and resourceful co-ordinators at the local level.

“It emphasises the relationship between those in and of the identified community, and others who may surround, support, interact and influence it, such as statutory bodies, other forms of support infrastructure, professional advisors and funding bodies. Priorities for action, for ways of organising and for key decisions should remain in the control of community members” (Macmillan, 2020).

Community ownership is key here – that control and influence is **community-led**. An agency partner reflected on how this has worked in one of the Big Local evaluation areas: *“When you're doing a high-profile project like this in an urban area, you need the community buy-in so people say 'we did this'. Growing Together ran the community consultation, got local residents on side with the project and headed off any objections. It was their involvement that made it a community project”*.

In most Big Local areas there is a desire for greater community ownership and control. The majority of Big Local partnerships were brand new forms of organisation when they were first created ten or so years ago, bringing together a range of people new to each other, and community ownership takes time to build. It is unsurprising, therefore, that in some areas it is only in the last couple of years that ownership and leadership can be said to have

broadened beyond the work of a few key activists. In this respect, one Big Local partnership recently claimed: *“This is what Big Local was always about, changing people’s thinking”*. Another expressed an absolute belief that residents are the experts and that, *“It is about getting the communities to be the leaders, not the followers...”*.

There are examples of how this community-led influence is developing, such as the Birchfield Environment Task Group that brings together local residents and agencies to address local concerns. In Barrowcliff, the Big Local partnership demonstrated its leadership role when it successfully pulled together residents, community groups, social housing providers and the council in an action day to clean up the neighbourhood.

Moreover, foundations of community ownership and control built prior to 2020 were capitalised on during the pandemic (Macmillan, 2020; Wilson et al, 2020). A good example is provided by Lawrence Weston, which was part of the Bristol City Council COVID-19 task force for the estate. They influenced the creation of vaccine booster pop up clinics when there was low take up because the nearest available vaccination centre was two bus rides away. Strategic influence through the pandemic is also evident in Ramsey where:

“... the district council is taking note of what we are saying – they are listening and acting on what we say. This is one of the biggest things that has happened. The district council is talking about how they can learn from the response ... [they] want this to inform their strategies” (Big Local worker).

On the whole, however, this aspect of community-led infrastructure is less well evidenced across all the 15 Our Bigger Story areas. There are several key reasons for this, although they vary between areas. These reasons include:

- Some Big Local partnerships appear to have become rather inward looking – in as much as they want to do everything themselves and seem not to appreciate the value of working with others. This can be reinforced by mistrust and a belief that they will not be listened to by wider power holders.

- There are Big Local partnerships, especially the case in larger cities, who find themselves competing for voice alongside other community-led initiatives.
- It may be that useful strategic links are held by paid staff rather than residents. This raises questions about where control and influence really lie.
- Some Big Local participants argue that key stakeholders simply do not want to engage with community-led groups, viewing this as too difficult or as getting in the way of other priorities. This is undoubtedly the experience of some residents:

“Here the council [names authority] is very focused on a very set approach to what is transformation and that is focused on businesses and kerb appeal rather than bottom-up change. So how much you can veer them off one approach ... that’s difficult” (Big Local partnership member).

These challenges highlight how problematic it can be if a Big Local partnership cannot form a constructive relationship with any of the wider bodies in their area.

It is pertinent, therefore, to draw learning from those areas that have asserted ownership, control and influence. From these case study areas, it is clear that organisational ‘form’ becomes important. One Big Local worker described how, in their experience, Big Local has settled down to become more of a conduit between the community and local government, and to this end a Big Local partnership member envisaged:

“...an organisational structure that gets their foot in the door and be listened to in a way that is more than ‘oh it’s Mandy who lives down the street and is being a bit shouty’”.

This point was reiterated by a resident in another area who, despite frustrations (and an acknowledgement that it has been a steep learning curve), has persevered in seeking to secure greater strategic and community recognition for Big Local in the area. Their commitment and sheer

persistence shines through in the way they spoke about holding onto the vision for the community, as developed through Big Local, having plans and activities that are ready to implement, keeping residents and other stakeholders in the loop through regular communications, working through direct personal contact where possible to build relationships rather than email exchanges, and doing the background research so that they start from an informed position about the opportunities and resources available. They also stressed that:

“Without Big Local [we] wouldn’t have opened these doors, [it has] been instrumental in doing what we have done ... Having the finance is one thing but it is having the credibility [of Big Local]”.

Credibility, both for residents within the community and for external bodies and wider stakeholders, appears to come in part from the organisational form as described above. But it also comes from having a track record, from having delivered – whether that be about establishing and running projects or leading and influencing change. One Big Local, previously perceived as a “fractious little group”, is now seen to have credibility because of successful delivery of a council commission – from this it has been able to develop a positive track record. Credibility, however, is hard won and can easily be dissipated – the failure of a Big Local partnership to deliver on a key community objective could set them back, at least in the eyes of residents. Retaining credibility and sustaining mechanisms and approaches to community-led infrastructure are thus key questions for Big Local areas at this point in the programme, as we discuss further below.

Facilitation of future community-led action and change

As the Big Local programme comes to an end, most Big Local partnerships are putting their minds to the creation of structures for community decision making, and that can resource, oversee and be accountable for future development in their localities. As one resident commented: *‘This 10-year business is great. ... but even so, at the end of 10 years, there’s still going to be a cliff edge if you don’t make it happen....’*

The aim in all these areas is to provide a future succession vehicle. As Table Two below indicates, only one Big Local partnership has made a definite decision not to continue in any form, and governance structures are already in place in eight areas.

Table 3
Planning for succession bodies

No plan for succession	1
Thinking about it	2
Plans emerging but not completed	4
Merger with existing Locally Trusted Organisation	3
New Community Interest Company established	1
New Charitable Incorporated Organisation established	4

The emerging governance structures vary. As highlighted in a previous evaluation report, *Building on Local* (McCabe et al, 2021), the challenge will be to maintain the community-led aspect of Big Local which is about more than the creation of a successful neighbourhood charity. Opportunities for the person in the street to “step up the influence ladder” (Big Local rep) – to be able to take on governance roles, and assert some community power and control, may become more problematic when support from Local Trust has stopped and groups are trying to meet the regulatory requirements of, for example, the Charity Commission.

The extent to which these new structures will fulfil all the characteristics of community-led infrastructure therefore is not yet known. They all intend to operate at the community level, though some are broadening their community geography. The hyper-local nature of Big Local has been challenging for some, seen as being “too small to be attractive to funders” (Big Local

partnership member), and/or not reflective of the community's identity. To date, four Big Local partnerships have adopted, or are planning to adopt, this route and have been aligning their reach with existing local administrative boundaries or pulling in nearby neighbourhoods. Some of the already established succession bodies are building up a track record of delivery before they face the 'cliff edge' described above, in order to create credible community-led organisations.

Big Local partnerships, then, are harnessing the agency and relationships they have developed, using their Big Local money and in some cases support from Local Trust to build a future of community-led change. This is a demonstration of community strength and increasing community power. It is **a real achievement of the Big Local programme** and something rarely encountered in previous regeneration and community programmes (Batty et al, 2010; Carpenter, 2014).

5. Reflections on the concept of community-led infrastructure

We have posed the concept of community-led infrastructure as a way of understanding what has happened and is happening in Big Local areas. We suggest that there is something qualitatively different about what seems to be emerging from this programme when compared with previous community participation and regeneration initiatives. In unpacking this concept, we have identified the functions and potential outcomes of community-led infrastructure, as indicated in Table 4 below.

We are not suggesting that all Big Local partnerships show evidence of carrying out all these functions or indeed of achieving all the high-level outcomes. What we can see, however, is all of the 15 areas performing many of the community level functions on the left and achievement of some of the outcomes on the right. And we can identify three or four Big Local areas which are achieving all the high-level outcomes and can be said to have built a credible community-led infrastructure that has the potential

Table 4
Community-led infrastructure: functions and high-level outcomes

 Functions and activities	 High level outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researching and understanding needs and challenges • Listening to and valuing different voices • Identifying priorities for action • Holding a community vision • Community and organisational accountability • Building shared goals • Active citizenship • Creating community leadership • Facilitating resident networks • Collective decision making which is inclusive of diverse participants • Greater co-ordination between groups • Connecting the dots at a local level /signposting and networking • Building trusting relationships • Personal and group development • Broad range of activities/interventions • Capability to mobilise around different causes • Creating spaces for dialogue/discussion and peer learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Credible resident-led structures • Connected networks of residents • Trusting relationships at community level • Community inclusivity and cohesion • Effective relationships with agencies • Strengthened resident voice and influence

to be long lasting. These Big Locals have the following key elements in common. They:

- are developing and holding on to a community vision
- focus on community change rather than activities per se
- have a visible presence in the community and create wider community 'buy in'
- are planning pro-actively (linking local priorities with wider policy/strategic goals) and for the long-term
- have a clear focus on the local but have built strategic networks and alliances
- have respectful working relationships with other agencies
- show an early emphasis on building future and sustainable community-led organisation and structures.

This leads us to consider what propels community-led infrastructure and what hinders it.

Table 5
What facilitates or hinders the development of community led infrastructure

The enablers

- Access to (flexible) money
- Access to a meeting space – physical and virtual
- Access to support e.g., advisors, mentors, facilitators, community workers
- Access to information and learning opportunities
- Reach to all people across the neighbourhood/broad-based community involvement
- A mediating and negotiating approach / helping local groups see the benefits of working together
- A community held vision/community ownership
- Neighbourhood identity
- Being seen to make a difference (e.g., COVID-19 was a propeller of delivery in times of need and joint working)
- Making the connections with council policy and broader strategies
- Commitment to the area – residents putting in time
- Distributed form of leadership e.g., via working groups/ pool of volunteer activists
- Advocacy for small community groups
- Understanding how the area and other agencies work e.g., where responsibilities lie, how and where decisions are taken
- Enabling (rather than leading) role understood by paid workers

The obstacles

- Power in too few hands
- Inward looking
- Focus on the short and immediate rather than the long term
- Getting caught up in day-to-day operations, e.g., running a community hub
- Competing with other groups for voice and influence
- Hyper-local nature makes opportunities for city wide influence difficult
- Paid worker dominance/ gatekeeping (often unconsciously)
- Conflict between residents
- Disputes between community groups (often historical)
- External bodies – especially those at local level – who feel undermined and won't contribute e.g., town and parish councils

The emerging picture of community-led infrastructure reflects the differences in Big Local areas, and as stated at the outset, it is often a cyclical process rather than a static or continually advancing development – all communities are changeable and fluctuate over time. Mann et al (2022, p.8) cite Kaldor (2003) who refers to civil society as *“the process through which individuals negotiate, argue, struggle against or agree with each other and with the centres of political and economic authority”*.

This focus on process leads us to a further enabling factor – the people who take part in the Big Local programme and make it happen: *“... [the] lived experiences of key individuals who play a critical role in sustaining civil society activity over time, demonstrating their often ‘lifelong’ commitments to the places and spaces in which they operate, and which have meaning to them”* (ibid). The role of key individuals, usually with their own history of community activism, is ever apparent in the areas where community-led infrastructure is in place, or at least emerging. These people have been committed to Big Local and worked proactively from the off; they have drawn on local networks for support, encouraged previously inactive residents to join in, mediated between residents and agencies when necessary, spotted opportunities for collaboration and further resources, and carried out practical and operational tasks as well as having a strategic overview.

For all the talk of structures, approaches, resources and outcomes, it should never be forgotten that behind the seemingly abstract concepts of resident-led decision-making, community power and community-led infrastructure, there is the relentless work undertaken together by living, breathing people prepared to ‘have a go’, with all that entails in terms of values, commitments, emotions, frailties, personal challenges, skills and experiences.

We end this section with two reflections. The first relates to the strengths, limitations and potential of the practice we see and therefore of this understanding. Is community-led infrastructure simply neighbourhood organisation that is resident-led or are we seeing something

qualitatively different emerging from the Big Local programme – the creation of credible, pro-active, community-led bodies that aim at the local level to have a lasting future and make a difference to their communities? We see the answer to this question in the different manifestations of Big Local activity in the Our Bigger Story evaluation. Many community-led activities, groups and organisations have been supported through the Big Local programme. In some areas, however, the programme has supported the emergence and development of a richer, more embedded set of networks and connections, underpinned by the Big Local partnership as a coordinating community leadership mechanism. This is well encapsulated in this view from one Big Local partnership:

“Having that word ‘vision’... has been essential to where we are now and the more people [you] can gather round to see that vision and share it, well ... at the end of the day, it’s a no-brainer.”

In these areas we have seen the potential for enduring community-led infrastructure, making connections with wider institutions and agendas in the service of an ethos of resident-led change. These areas highlight the possibilities for community-led infrastructure and stand, in different ways, as exemplars of community power in action.

Secondly, we need to consider where this takes us with regard to learning for future policy and practice, both inside and beyond Local Trust. What are the contexts, conditions and support that have helped in this emergence of community-led infrastructure and how might these be replicated? Here it is critical to acknowledge that community-led infrastructure:

- can be identified through certain characteristics – activities, functions and the high-level outcomes that emerge
- has been supported through access to resources, programme and worker support, places and spaces to meet and other enablers identified in Table 5, alongside people on the ground who have committed their time, knowledge, experience, skills and energies to make a difference where they live

- has not only been integral to swift and appropriate responses to community needs during the pandemic but has also played an important role in co-ordinating local action over the longer term and forms the roots of future development and change at community level
- requires time and long-term investment to build relationships of trust, community connections, community decision-making and power.

This last point above draws attention to the locus of control and leadership at community level; that is, how things come to be organised and how decisions are made. It is this that perhaps differentiates the outcomes of the Big Local programme from what has gone before. Previous place-based programmes include the 1968 Urban Aid programme through to other government funded programmes such as Single Regeneration Budget of the 1990s, Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders and New Deal for Communities in the 2000s as well as sporadic community empowerment programmes. They may have contained some similar elements to the Big Local programme (e.g., time in the case of New Deal for Communities, and community work support and networks in some Neighbourhood Management areas) but they did not encompass all the enablers to building strong communities as outlined in Section 3. And crucially, whatever their intentions at the outset, they were not resident-led. There are some examples of positive legacies at community level but it is hard to find examples of consequent systems of community connection and control.

Questions, however, remain. These require a furthering in our understanding of, for example, the extent to which community-led infrastructure is a negotiated process in terms of resident power, and perceptions around it from other community level bodies, traditional power holders and policy makers. We will reflect on such questions in future stages of the evaluation which will follow Big Local areas as they move on beyond current funding arrangements.

6 Concluding remarks

In Big Local partnerships there is a sense of **optimism and a determination** to keep going – both as individual local initiatives but also potentially as a wider national network of Big Local participants – but also a sense of **realism**. Public finances have exceptionally tight constraints. Further, in terms of income, charities (and particularly small charities, defined as having an annual income of less than £100,000 per annum⁵) have witnessed declines in income in excess of 15% and are operating in an increasingly volatile funding environment (Clifford et al 2021).

A further concern is not only about the survival, and hopefully the thriving, of Big Local partnerships as legal entities post the end of current funding. Rather it is around how the **learning from Big Local** can be embedded into wider policy and practice. Henderson (2012) notes that, whilst there was innovative practice in previous area-based initiatives, there has been a failure to learn what worked – even where such initiatives overlapped in the same time and place. This is reinforced by the recent UK Onward report (Krasniqi et al, 2021) which reflected on nearly 60 years of regeneration initiatives and also noted the failure to embed learning:

“For all that activity there has been remarkably little policy focus in Whitehall on understanding what works best in improving outcomes in the most challenging communities in the UK – and how successful approaches can be scaled more broadly to communities everywhere”. (p.2)

There is the opportunity in the Our Bigger Story evaluation to follow a number of areas after they have spent their Big Local Funding, unlike in previous national evaluations. This provides a unique lens through which to address three key questions:

- There will be physical legacies from Big Local funding (see Building Big Local Futures Paper Two – forthcoming) but how many Big Local areas move on to longer term sustainability, post current funding arrangements?
- Has the long-term nature of Big Local funding and the flexibilities and support this has offered been a critical factor in a successful succession?
- Has the ethos of resident-led change and the building of community power been adopted in wider policy and funding frameworks?

The coming years will no doubt be challenging – but also exciting – as Big Local partnerships transition into new structures that sustain and grow community connections and control.

⁵ £100,000 is approximately the average annual spend of Big Local areas involved in OBS

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Appendix 2: Summary of methodology

Over the last two years the evaluation has adopted a mixed methods approach to gathering the data which informs this report. This has included:

- Literature reviews of the academic and policy literature as well as materials produced by Local Trust and the 15 individual Big Local areas involved in the study
- 401 individual and small group learning conversations with Big Local partnership members, workers, Reps, delivery partners and other external stakeholders
- 25 facilitated discussions and observations at Big Local Partnership and working group meetings
- 2 cross case study area workshops. In 2020 this was a half day online event and in 2021 a two-day residential involving 32 representatives from 14 of the case study areas
- An analysis of diaries kept, over a six-month period in 2021, by two residents and one worker in three Big Local areas.

The research has taken place in the context of COVID-19. Inevitably much of the focus of those learning conversations, particularly over 2020 and at the height of later restrictions, was on the impact of the pandemic. At the core of each of the methods adopted however was learning about change, changing needs and responses as well as plans for the future in each Big Local area. Each learning conversation was recorded and analysed thematically.

The majority of individual and group learning conversations were conducted by Zoom. However, face to face sessions at community events and/or with Big Local partnership members and other stakeholder were also conducted in eight case study areas, as and when restrictions allowed. These have contributed to the making of the following 13 films:

1. Barrowcliff [Gallows Centre](#)
2. Barrowcliff [Big Clean Up](#)
3. [Birchfield Change all around 2](#)
4. [Greening Birchfield](#)
5. [Bountagu Fun Day](#)
6. Grassland Hasmoor [community facilities](#)
7. Grassland Hasmoor [green and open spaces working group](#)
8. [Grassland Hasmoor podcast – their approach and future](#)
9. Northfleet [Fun Day](#)
10. Ramsey [Market](#)
11. Ramsey Million Partnership discussing [building connections and confidence](#)
12. Ramsey reflections on [ways of working together](#)
13. Ramsey neighbourhood Trust on [what community means locally](#)
14. Westfield [Play Park](#)

About the Third Sector Research Centre

The third sector provides support and services to millions of people. Whether providing front-line services, making policy or campaigning for change, good quality research is vital for organisations to achieve the best possible impact. The Third Sector Research Centre exists to develop the evidence base on, for and with the third sector in the UK. Working closely with practitioners, policy-makers and other academics, TSRC is undertaking and reviewing research, and making this research widely available. The Centre works in collaboration with the third sector, ensuring its research reflects the realities of those working within it, and helping to build the sector's capacity to use and conduct research. There are currently 145 working and shorter briefing papers on the TSRC website addressing critical issues in the voluntary and community sectors.

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