

# Building Big Local Futures: Towards legacies for people and places (Paper 2)

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** 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 Revue (referred to as Revue 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

Thanks also to Paul Morgans, the Our Bigger Story (OBS) film maker, and Helen Harris, the OBS administrator.

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An Our Bigger Story film,  
[Building Community Power: Towards legacies for people and places](#),  
 accompanies this report

# 1 Summary

## Introduction to Building Futures

As the Big Local programme moves nearer to its end, how are Big Local areas thinking ahead, and what futures are being considered beyond the programme? To address this question, Building Big Local Futures is a pair of complementary papers around the broad themes of succession (paper no.1) and legacy (this paper, no.2). They use material from the 15 study areas in the Our Bigger Story longitudinal multi-media evaluation of Big Local to examine the extent to which residents have used programme money and support as a starting block to foster and create a sustained impact. This paper looks specifically at the potential legacies of the programme - “what remains after the £1 million” - in people and places.

## Building Big Local legacies

Legacy is partly about what Big Locals are ‘leaving behind’, but also encompasses their broader aspirations to be sustainable and to thrive beyond 2026. In practice there are four main ways in which Big Local study areas are currently thinking about legacy:

1. Physical legacies, particularly the desire for high quality community and public spaces. Residents saw physical and environmental legacy as about leaving behind something visible from the programme, through the creation or upgrade of community hubs, play parks, making green spaces more useable and other environmental developments.
2. Shaping local services and facilities, in four different ways: by commissioning bespoke, relevant and appropriate services; through Big Locals delivering their own services; through support for social enterprise development; and by influencing policy makers and service providers.
3. People-based legacies, given that lasting change for people is critical to a full understanding of legacy. Big Locals have been thinking variously about: connecting people by common interests and acting collectively to make a difference; nurturing a wider pool of active and connected residents to continue working together; creating a skilled and confident community and investing in future generations as potential community leaders; and building capacity in existing and new voluntary and community groups to sustain activities beyond 2026.
4. A cultural legacy, of people feeling more positive about where they live and having a greater affinity and identity with the area, from relatively small-scale arts activities that celebrate the community, to more strategic and systemic attempts to promote the area or change wider negative images.

## Managing and sustaining change

A key question as the programme heads towards its conclusion is the extent to which activities will be sustained and how investments in people will leave communities that are confident in creating further change.

All partnerships are required to provide a legacy statement<sup>1</sup>, but some of these are clearer and more thought through than others. Areas with succession bodies in place or in the pipeline have legacy plans that are more likely to flourish. However, there are some partnerships whose vision of the future may not be financially viable. Some areas are also suggesting that the Big Local project was good while it lasted but it is now time to draw a line under it.

<sup>1</sup> Since 2019, Big Local partnerships have been asked to produce a legacy statement to sit alongside their vision and action plan. This outlines what they plan to leave behind when the Big Local £1 million is spent i.e., what they hope will be long-lasting.

Questions remain about what will happen when core funding and the programme support structure disappears and/or the energy of residents wane. Paid workers and leading activists have typically formed the backbone in supporting resident-led activities and forging relationships with other organisations. In many areas attention has been given to ensuring that residents are more confident and skilled to carry on with improving their communities. Building capabilities here focuses on a range of areas, such as running activities on a voluntary basis through to supporting those people who are more knowledgeable and skilled in project management, governance and attracting future funding.

As areas move beyond Big Local funding, Our Bigger Story will have a unique opportunity to follow what happens next in the coming years: who has fallen by the wayside, who has survived, who has thrived – as well as understanding why and how.

## Reflections

A key challenge throughout Big Local has been how to build and sustain its resident-led ethos which integrates not only what happens, but who drives action, who connects things up and shapes change. Some areas focus on valuable but rather fragmented activities and responses to need, without making broader connections between them and with wider local strategies. In contrast, other Big Local areas have struggled at times to connect their longer-term strategies and higher-level visions with grass roots community engagement.

In Spring 2022, with over half of the Our Bigger Story study areas having three to four years' funding remaining, legacy and succession cannot be guaranteed, and there are additional immediate pressures on communities emerging from COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis.

There are, however, grounds for optimism. Long term funding has secured physical legacies of, for example, community hubs and improved green spaces which would not have happened in any programme with a shorter funding time scale. But it has also built greater momentum for grassroots community activity in most areas over the last decade.

## 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 lead an evaluation of 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 suggests 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 Big Local areas across England are working to make a difference in their communities, to make their areas even better places to live. To some extent 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).

*Building Big Local Futures* encompasses two complementary papers which aim 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 papers around the broad themes

of succession (paper 1) and legacy (paper 2), both of which are highly pertinent 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.

In the companion [Building Big Local Futures paper](#), we focussed on community power, the process of resident-led change and the creation of community-led infrastructure. In this complementary paper, we look at potential legacies in people and places. Local Trust defines legacy as “what remains after the £1 million” (Local Trust, 2018), and Big Local partnerships have been encouraged to provide legacy statements<sup>2</sup>, together with a costed vision and action plan, in all recent Big Local plans. For some, legacies are associated with physical assets and spaces — as well as the outcomes and impact that can be seen in the community from the use of the spaces. For others they are more about the changes that can be seen in local services, and there are those for whom legacy is more about changes in people and the community’s identity. These different perspectives on legacy are explored in this paper through the lens of the 15 Our Bigger Story case study areas.

<sup>2</sup> Since 2019, Big Local partnerships have been asked to produce a legacy statement to sit alongside their vision and action plan. This outlines what they plan to leave behind when the Big Local £1 million is spent i.e., what they hope will be long-lasting.

### 3 Building Big Local legacies

As noted above, there are different perspectives about what legacy might involve. There are tangible legacies —things that we can all see – such as the enhancement, or creation, of community facilities. There are also changes that relate to, for example, the reconfiguration of, or improved access to, local services, as well as more people stepping up to take on leadership roles within their community. Then there are the less tangible, more subjective, legacies of experiences and feelings; how people feel about themselves, their roles and contributions and the wider community. Such legacies however can be inter-connected. For example, it is not simply that there is a new community hub as a physical legacy, but more importantly the opportunities that this resource offers in terms of access to a greater diversity of activities and services. Inter-connected legacies could also be seen in terms of how physical and environmental improvements to an area improve residents' sense of wellbeing and belonging (Lilley et al, 2021), and they connect to strengthen community and social infrastructure:

“The places and structures and buildings or clubs that enable people to get together, meet, socialise, volunteer and co-operate” (Gregory, 2018, p.11).

In research with Big Local areas, legacy was defined as “what remains after the £1 million” (Local Trust, 2018). Respondents, from five Big Local partnerships that were close to using up all of their investment, talked about legacy as being a combination of five themes (ibid.):

- A strengthened civil society — built on connections and relationships across and between organisations and agencies which would continue beyond 2026
- An active community — a wider pool of active and connected residents which will continue to drive improvement and change

- A skilled and confident community — including leaving people with greater employment potential as well as collective skills in community and organisational development
- Investing in future generations — children and young people with a sense of ownership and responsibility, becoming the new generation of community leaders
- Sustaining activities – activities which continue to be successful and sustainable.

In these five dimensions there is a sense of legacy as leaving things behind, of what things can remain and endure after Big Local funding has been used up. In terms of where we are in 2022, participants in the Our Bigger Story evaluation study areas have talked about legacy in relation to four key areas:

- People - coming together more, with more opportunities to learn and socialise
- Place – new spaces for community activity; improved physical environment
- Connections – people feeling connected; organisations working better together
- Succession – new legal entities in place for future organisation and activities (Wilson et al, 2022).

If anything, these dimensions have become even more important in people's thinking about legacy post COVID-19 (Langdale et al, 2021). It is worth noting that the first three - people, place and connections - were highlighted in the NCVO 'Early Years' evaluation of the Big local programme (summary report, 2014 np). The fourth dimension relates to succession - the majority of the partnerships in the 15 Our Bigger Story study areas are looking to use the resources and

learning from the programme as a platform for new structures and ways of working beyond Big Local. They intend to continue to work towards the original Big Local outcomes, of making a difference and an even better place to live, whilst retaining the resident-led ethos of the programme. In short, partnerships are thinking as much about succession as they are about legacy in terms of what is left behind when current funding expires.

We provide more detail of the thinking currently underway in the Our Bigger Story study areas in the following sub-sections, looking in turn at physical legacies, shaping local services and facilities, people-based legacies, and a cultural legacy. Here we explore not only what Big Local areas are 'leaving behind' but also their aspirations to be sustainable and to thrive beyond 2026.

### 3.1 Physical legacies

The desire for high quality community and public spaces has been a recurring theme since Big Local partnerships agreed a vision for their areas and submitted their first plans. In an early evaluation report (McCabe et al, 2017, p.81), we found that residents saw physical and environmental legacy as about leaving behind something visible from the Big Local programme. This has included the creation of community hubs, play parks, making green spaces more useable and other environmental improvements.

#### Community hubs

The apparent need for community hubs became significant in the early years of the Big Local programme. Government austerity measures from 2010 onwards saw public expenditure decline and a subsequent reduction in the availability of public spaces, e.g., libraries and community halls, that could be used as meeting rooms, drop-in centres and locally based service centres. Traynor and Simpson (2020) reported how community leaders saw austerity as the driver for protecting or creating community hubs – they felt the need to step in to ensure the provision of crucial community and social infrastructure. This rationale was undoubtedly also a factor in Big Local priorities, though as reported at the same time (McCabe et al, 2020)

ownership, or at least management, of community hubs were also deemed to be significant in raising local awareness about Big Local itself by providing a visible presence in communities.

The conversion of existing unsafe, under-used or redundant buildings into community hubs, such as in the [Growing Together](#) area and in Westfield, has created a focal point in neighbourhoods that have little else. In other areas, such as Barrowcliff and Catton Grove, Big Local partnerships have invested in existing community centres, for example through hiring space for community activities, and have supported their future organisational and financial sustainability as a legacy for the area. For some areas the legacy of a community hub remains a work in progress. Plans for the new-build community centre in Lawrence Weston have been delayed as a result of COVID-19 and rising construction costs. In Birchfield, four years of negotiations for the transfer of a disused Local Education Authority building broke down and alternative options are being pursued.

The focus on getting community hubs up and running before the end of the programme is testimony to the desire to leave something physical behind, an entity that residents can see and make use of for many years to come. For this reason, there are recent and ongoing new builds and large refurbishment projects, consuming a large proportion of Big Local funds. [Grassland Hasmoor's Hub](#) at the Club and pavilion projects, the [Ramsey community and sport pavilion](#) and Radstock and Westfield's community health hub in the new GP surgery, are cases in point. Most of these buildings are multi-purpose, not only providing for a range of community activities but they are also combined with other leisure, sporting or service uses. Partnerships hope that continuing financial sustainability of these buildings will be ensured by, for example, social clubs, cricket clubs and health providers. In turn, the aim is that this will ensure ongoing community benefit years after the Big Local programme has ended.

#### Play parks

As with community hubs, the desire for play parks was also in part a response to their decline through austerity: "over 400 local authority



playgrounds have been closed since 2010, with at least one third of all local authorities making cuts to their play provision” (from Association of Play Industries, quoted by Stenning, 2019). For example, Barrowcliff Big Local prioritised [a play park based](#) on residents’ aspirations (as expressed on a ‘Wall of Ideas’ in 2012-13) after it realised that a long promised play area was never going to be delivered. In a plan review the Barrowcliff Steering Group, which has always seen this large capital project as its greatest legacy, reported that:

“By universal consensus, the Park project has proven to be a huge success. The park was packed with children and parents on the opening day and has been heavily used ever since. Whilst it was always expected that children and young people on the estate would benefit, the wider benefit to parents and families was not fully anticipated. The Park has proved to contribute significantly to social cohesion on the estate as parents inter-act with each other whilst their children are using the facility. ...”

Public play parks have continued to be created. [Westfield](#) has supported the creation of a new play park and Three Parishes have funded playground improvements; Radstock and Westfield is supporting enhanced outdoor learning spaces in local schools; Ramsey is building a skatepark and Lawrence Weston has supported a [BMX track](#). Growing Together has created no less than seven play areas plus a green gym. One resident here commented: “It’s something lasting – it’ll give generation after generation ... benefit”.

However, it is uncertain how long lasting these play areas will be after the Big Local money has gone. In several areas, Big Local partnerships have signed up to cover maintenance costs in the short-term with an understanding that the local authority will pick up longer-term responsibilities. In practice, though, the costs of maintenance and replacement might be something which cash strapped councils may find difficult to sustain. To counter this possibility, there are examples of strategies designed to ensure durability, as in Three Parishes where the play equipment has been designed to be low maintenance, and in Radstock and

Westfield where the investment has been made in school grounds on the basis that the schools will pick up longstanding maintenance costs.

### Green spaces

Improvement to green space has been an early priority in many areas as part of Big Local ambitions to increase community pride. If anything, environmental improvements, particularly in high density housing areas in the programme, have become more of a priority since the onset of COVID-19 (Ellis Paine et al, 2022).

This has taken a number of forms:

- financial support for park based ‘friends’ groups e.g., in Whitley Bay, and in Catton Grove where consultation around park improvements led to the development of an independently constituted ‘[Friends of Waterloo Park](#)’. This group, with some financial support from Big Local and the local authority, developed a 10-year management plan for the park and in 2021 secured a Green Flag award
- the creation of community allotments in Catton Grove and community gardens in [Birchfield](#) and Growing Together
- tree planting in the Bountagu Big Local area and entering the Britain in Bloom competition in Lawrence Weston
- placing a community facility within a park to make the green space more useable, as in Grassmoor where the new pavilion, complete with toilets, “... has just transformed the way that park is used” (director of a locally trusted organisation<sup>3</sup>).
- the development of social enterprises which are aimed at opening up more community based green space, such as the No Walls garden in [Northfleet](#), and a community orchard in Three Parishes
- engaging residents in a strategic approach to green space improvements. The Grassland Hasmoor Green and Open Spaces working

<sup>3</sup> Locally trusted organisation: A locally trusted organisation (LTO) is the organisation chosen by people in a Big Local area or the partnership to administer and account for funding, and/or deliver activities or services on behalf of a partnership. Areas might work with more than one locally trusted organisation depending on the plan and the skills and resources required.

group, formed at an early public meeting to launch Big local in the area, has involved hundreds of volunteers and worked with the relevant authorities to open up numerous walking and cycling routes, created a [petanque court and club](#), and made pockets of green space more attractive to residents.

There is much evidence for the value of green space. A World Health Organisation paper stated in 2016 that:

“Urban green spaces, such as parks, playgrounds, and residential greenery, can promote mental and physical health, and reduce morbidity and mortality in urban residents by providing psychological relaxation and stress alleviation, stimulating social cohesion, supporting physical activity, and reducing exposure to air pollutants, noise and excessive heat” (World Health Organisation 2016, p.4).

But recent research also demonstrates that people living in the poorest neighbourhoods often have the least access to green space (Institute of Health Equity, 2020). In addition, the recent pandemic has shown green spaces to be even more important to communities, particularly in terms of good mental health, than Big Local partnerships might have thought when they started the above schemes. Green space improvements are in themselves a legacy of Big Local, but they also serve to leave behind additional social and health outcomes.

### Ecological and other environmental development

The aspect of community pride mentioned above has led Big Local partnerships towards cleaning, as well as greening, their areas. Clean-ups and litter picks have been common and though it is arguable that they may only have short-term gains, the engagement of residents in such activities can create a different attitude and culture in the community. Whitley Bay Big Local, for example, took the decision to employ a Tidy Town Worker who works with residents to clean up the area and to get involved in planting schemes where they live. There are some Big Local projects which are particularly ambitious and explicitly about leaving behind a positive environmental legacy. Three such examples are:

- the major [regeneration of three lakes](#) in the Growing Together area. The aim was to restore amenity value, sustainability and biodiversity; completed 2020
- the development of zero carbon housing and a green energy scheme which includes a [solar farm and wind turbine](#) in Lawrence Weston. This is part of the work programme of a separately established subsidiary company, Ambition Community Energy; ongoing
- the Whitley Bay community-led environmental action plan and creation of an [eco-hub](#) which aims for “carbon neutrality, to provide information and inspiration, to encourage local leadership and to be a financially sustainable hub that survives for generations to come” (Carnaffan, 2021); ongoing.

## 3.2 Shaping local services and facilities

There are four key ways in which Big Local partnership have attempted to influence how services are delivered and facilities operate. The first is through the commissioning of bespoke services which are contextually and specifically relevant and appropriate, the second is through Big Locals developing and delivering their own services, the third is through support for social enterprise development, and the fourth is through influencing policy makers and service providers.

### Commissioning services

A unique feature of the Big Local programme is earmarked financial resources within community control. This has enabled Big Local partnerships (via their LTOs) to commission services directly from providers. Several areas have done this, particularly in the fields of youth work, welfare rights advice and employment support, often to maintain services when local authority funding was withdrawn, or to respond quickly to emerging needs during the pandemic. Commissioned services are a particular feature in two rural study areas where access to services has been limited by distance and poor public transport links. However, this practice raises questions about what happens when there is no Big Local money

left — will the services disappear as quickly as they came? There are also concerns about the limited extent to which Big Locals have been able to use their bargaining power to commission tailored rather than generic services. There is little evidence of a lasting legacy from this approach.

### Self-delivery of services

Several Big local areas run their own services, either entirely through volunteer effort or with help from paid workers. Such services range from children's and youth work through to job clubs and older people's exercise classes. There is the potential for some of these to stop if there is no further money for room hire or paid staff, though in several areas the investment that Big Locals have made in setting up these services, and their ownership of them, means that residents are committed to securing their future. In Ramsey, for example, costed business planning is ongoing to ensure financial sustainability of projects and activities but also the potential of longer-term local employment through training residents as youth workers. In Northfleet, the Big Local paid the room rental costs for new community groups – most of which have become self-sustaining on a voluntary basis.

### Social enterprise development

Another way in which Big Local partnerships have shaped services is through financial and developmental support for social enterprises<sup>4</sup>. Bountagu, for example, has a small grants pot, the [Little ideas Fund](#), which is aimed at helping local people get their ideas off the ground and to start thinking about business planning. Birchfield has focused energy on the development of community-led enterprises out of which a health and wellbeing consortium has been set up to bid for larger pots of money. Three Parishes has funded the start-up costs of many social enterprises and now has a club of 50 new enterprises. As one of its members involved in community-based agriculture says, "we are in it for the long term".

Like any new business, not all social enterprises will survive. However, reports over the years, such as from New Philanthropy Capital (Ní

Ógáin 2012) and Social Enterprise UK (2021), demonstrate that social enterprises are more financially resilient and more likely to survive for the first five years than traditional businesses. Those that do will continue to provide locally appropriate services at community level and will generate income in the local economy.

### Influence over policy and service delivery

The long-term nature of the Big local programme enables community-led groups to form meaningful relationships with other agencies, such as local authorities, and thus maximise opportunities to influence service delivery and local facilities. [Whitley Bay Big Local](#) built relationships through its strategic partners meetings and used its influence and some of its money to shape the appearance of the seafront. It paid for the casts of more attractive street bollards from which the council could produce many more, and it worked to recreate the traditional Whitley Bay colour scheme for street furniture. As a result, residents feel their town looks better and is better. In Lawrence Weston, the demand from residents for a local supermarket has been met through the Big Local's negotiation and lobbying of the council and developers. Meanwhile its community-led housing campaign, in part aimed at creating a more mixed neighbourhood, is still in progress. Ramsey Million Partnership has campaigned for better transport provision and involved residents in shaping a potential new bus network. In addition, the partnership is named several times over as a key place maker in the Huntingdonshire District Council prospectus for growth document (2020).

## 3.3 People based legacies

Big Local investment in physical assets and the environment has been significant and is a tangible and visible legacy of the programme. However, it is the focus on people and the potential for this to leave a lasting legacy that is critical. Here we pick up the five Local Trust themes introduced above: a strengthened civil society, an active community, a skilled and confident community, investing in future generations and sustaining activities.

<sup>4</sup> Social enterprises are businesses that put the interests of people and planet ahead of shareholder gain. These businesses are driven by a social/environmental mission and reinvest profits into creating positive social change (Social Enterprise Mark CIC).

There are many examples of **people connected by common interests and acting collectively** to make a difference across all 15 Our Bigger Story areas. A community worker in one area described how the approach has been to “connect up people with similar interests who can then support each other”. In most places, there is every likelihood that existing relationships between resident-led groups will continue. For example, heritage groups in Ramsey have joined together to secure funding to continue their work of making the town an attractive place to visit, and in Northfleet there is a growing community arts movement which has a life that is, and will be, independent of Big Local.

Equally, the foundation stones for future collaboration between communities and local authorities have been built in several areas. In most areas, there is a **wider pool of active and connected residents**, people who will continue to work together to improve their own lives and the lives of others. Illustrations of this include the independently constituted working groups in Grassland Hasmoor which between them comprise hundreds of residents, and those involved in small-scale projects supported by a grants scheme in Whitley Bay.

The creation of a **skilled and confident community** has been a key theme in a majority of the Big Local case study areas. The approaches vary and have included:

- confidence building for local residents to try something and a ‘safe space’ in which to try out new ideas without fear of failure
- volunteering opportunities that have enabled residents to develop community development, local governance and project management skills, in some cases leading to paid employment, e.g., in Birchfield and in Grassland Hasmoor
- in at least two areas, Northfleet and Ramsey, residents who started out as activists and joined the Big Local partnership have gone on to become local councillors
- informal one-to-one support by paid workers which has enabled individual residents to set up as sole traders, e.g., in Northfleet

- structured support and training for social enterprise development, e.g., in Birchfield and in Three Parishes
- professional development opportunities for residents through Big Local paid roles that range from administrative to community work posts
- accredited training for residents so that they are qualified and skilled to take up job opportunities, e.g., construction skills certification in Barrowcliff, or to run local services, e.g., youth workers in Ramsey.

This last example, opportunities for young people to train in youth work, also points to how some Big Local partnerships have **invested in future generations**. These young people are potential community leaders who will pass on their learning to other young people in the future and hopefully sustain youth provision in the area. And in Radstock and Westfield, the Big Local has invested in a [young people’s ‘Learn to Lead’](#) programme in schools which aims to “normalise community engagement and youth empowerment” (community worker). Whilst not all areas have gone quite so far with regard to youth work training and young people’s leadership skills, most have invested in children’s and young people’s activities. These range from relatively large grants for a suite of weekly provision in the Growing Together area, through to holiday schemes in most areas and specialist services such as mental health and gang crime avoidance for young people in others, such as Hanwell.

Finally, **capacity building support for existing and new voluntary and community groups** has been an important feature in most areas, aimed at sustaining activities beyond 2026. In some cases, this has been through advice and signposting, e.g., for possible sources of funding or expert legal advice. In other areas Big Local grants have been conditional on groups working through application processes which act as a practice run for applying to other funders in the future. However, it is the sustaining of activity that is the crux to all of the above themes – the emergence of new groups, the new connections that need to be made, new opportunities for skills building, etc. We return to this in section four below.

### 3.4 A cultural legacy

In an earlier evaluation report, we talked about Big Local partnerships leaving behind a cultural legacy – people feeling more positive about where they live and having a greater affinity and identity with the area (McCabe et al, 2017). At one level the steps taken to increase residents' feelings of belonging can be small scale: arts activities that celebrate the community, as for example in Northfleet, or planned sculpture/public art installations in Hanwell.

Other activities may be more strategic and systemic in their approach. In Blackpool, Revoe Big Local aims to influence the area masterplan and see a significant change in the prevailing negative images of the area, involving physical appearance and stereotypes of residents. In Ramsey, the partnership invested early on in a separately branded 'Discover Ramsey' project which aims to make residents more aware of the significance of historical sites in the town and create a sense of community pride about where they live. This project has also helped to change attitudes of outsiders — local and regional social media suggests that Ramsey is now the place to be, the town has been described as thriving and vibrant, and the district council notes "A resounding and infectious community spirit exists in Ramsey. This has been strengthened and channelled by the Ramsey Million, a lottery funded project dedicated to making [Ramsey a better place to live](#), work and visit" (Huntingdonshire District Council, 2020, p.9).

When the Our Bigger Story evaluation of the Big local programme began in 2015, many people described their areas as forgotten. They felt that there had been a lack of public investment in making their neighbourhoods an attractive place to live, and to visit. Ramsey was one these places, as were several others. One of Whitley Bay Big Local's first commissions was to create its own masterplan for the town and this piece of work has informed the town's regeneration through rebranding of street furniture and the town's colour scheme. Similarly, Revoe Big Local is now working closely with the local authority on a masterplan for the main road which runs through the community. This links new housing in the south of Blackpool to leisure and tourist

facilities in the centre. The aim is to improve shop frontages, thereby not only enhancing the appearance of the area and how residents feel about their community, but also increasing footfall for local businesses and the local economy. In Lawrence Weston, the Neighbourhood and Community Plans have the stated aim of "changing the local demographic" and "widening housing choices" (community worker) through influencing private sector investment and the development of community owned housing initiatives.

These examples are all Big Local legacies, illustrating how the programme has provided a vehicle for voicing the change that residents wanted to see, and making at least some of that change happen. Residents have confidence they can make change and are moving from "a community that has an attitude that it is done to, to one that believes it can do" (community worker).

Holding on to an identity can, however, be a challenge. This is particularly an issue for those Big Local areas that are surrounded by large scale development in the control of quasi-governmental corporations which will change neighbourhood identities, demographics, road layouts, focal points, etc. Such development feels beyond resident control in areas, such as Bountagu and Birchfield; and also, in Northfleet where the Big Local has worked with the aim of "ensuring that Northfleet is, and remains, on the map" (resident).

## 4 Managing and sustaining change

In *Building Big Local Futures: building systems of connection and control* (Wilson et al, 2022), we provided more detail of how Big Local areas have invested in building powerful communities. That report concluded with questions about succession: whether the resident-led ethos of Big Local and models of community driven change will last beyond the Big Local programme, and how learning from this programme will inform future investment at community level. Here we are concerned with the extent to which activities will be sustained and how investments in people will leave behind communities that are confident in creating further change.

### Forward strategies

The 15 Our Bigger Story study areas expect their financial investment to end at various points over the next three to four years. In September 2021 they predicted end points that led to the timeline in Table 1 below.

**Table 1:**  
**Projected end of Big Local funds**

Year	2022	2023	2023-24	2025	2025-26
No: of areas	1	2	3	5	4

We anticipate that some of the areas with earlier spend out dates may take longer than they currently think to use their remaining funds. This is due to the after-effects of the pandemic and the time it takes to resume activities, delays in capital projects and plans that unravel or need to shift. There are some partnerships that want to stay firmly within the Big Local family and will schedule their final spending over as long a period as possible, and some that are getting ready to move on.

Local Trust has requested that all partnerships provide a legacy statement. Some of these are clearer and more thought through than others, and

are directly related to a costed plan up until their Big Local end point. The areas where legacy plans are more likely to flourish are those that already have succession bodies in place or at least in the pipeline, and have secured alternative/matched income. Some of these areas already have plans in place to sustain funding for activities and projects.

These plans range from monies from green energy provision in Lawrence Weston as a long-term funding stream through to plans to use rental income from community hubs. In one case, the partnership is exploring the potential for up-front investment in a loan fund which would generate sufficient funding to continue a small grant scheme (Radstock and Westfield). Others are exploring more broadly based funding strategies combining income generation from project attendance fees with grants from charitable foundations and trusts or contracts for service delivery with statutory agencies. Indeed, there are several areas that have already extended the boundaries of their legacy body to become more attractive to funders. Local Trust has supported the legacy planning process through learning networks, tailored support for plan development, and providing training for partnerships interested in raising funds from grant making trusts.

However, there are some partnerships whose vision of the future may not be financially viable, as a Big Local rep commented:

“After the [Big Local] money runs out they want to continue doing everything they do now. But to be honest they have not costed that and they really don’t know where the money might come from”.

In addition, there are some areas that are suggesting that the Big Local project was good while it lasted but it is now time to draw a line under it. Big Local areas that largely based their plans around commissioning services, for example, will be unable to continue this approach once the money runs out. This does not imply there is no legacy, just no direct succession of activities. In the Three Parishes Big Local area, for example,

residents point to the legacy of bringing more than £750,000 into the hands of local people and local economy through a benefits advice project since 2017. In this same area, social entrepreneurs will continue to serve the community and to connect with each other through an established network, a collective that may be well placed to attract future financial support and generate commercial income.

### People as the drivers of successive change

The examples in section three demonstrate that many thousands of people will have been touched by the Big Local programme — as beneficiaries of support services, as users of more relevant and accessible provision, and as volunteers and activists who are making a difference to where they live. It is beyond question that there is a much higher volume of activities and groups in each study area than was the case before the Big Local programme.

In many instances, processes have been put in place to ensure that, as far as possible, communities will contain more confident and skilled residents who work together and with other organisations to continually improve where they live. Such skills range from capabilities in running activities on a voluntary basis through to those people who are more knowledgeable and skilled in project management, governance and attracting future funding. In one Big Local area, for example, residents have talked about the “huge amount of people resources unleashed through Big Local” as well as “an increased confidence and belief that [they] can make change happen”.

There are, however, questions about what will happen when core funding and the whole programme support structure are no longer and/or energies of residents wane. Big Local money has often covered the costs of paid workers that provide the backroom support such as dealing with the paperwork, coordinating volunteers, fundraising etc. And this has been reinforced by the voluntary effort of highly active residents. As we reported previously, residents who have played leading roles may decide that the end of the Big Local programme is a good time to step back and have a rest (McCabe et al, 2021). It is

typically paid workers and leading activists who have helped residents to make connections and to mediate when they fall out, support engagement and volunteering, and have the time to meet and form relationships with other organisations, including council officers and business leaders. This potential gap is recognised by a local authority that has worked closely with Big Local:

“In the years that follow, it [Big Local] must become a springboard to continued community activity. [It] is home to at least 63 community groups, but these require support in order to continue and for any additional groups to be established.” (Huntingdonshire District Council, 2020, p.23).

As the above reference implies, community work, whether paid or unpaid, never stops. Those areas that have been outward focused and supported groups to be independent of Big Local are likely to see continued activism and we are confident that in some places there is enough momentum to keep things moving. This is particularly the case where community-led infrastructure (McCabe et al, 2021) has been built to provide a vehicle for promoting resident voice and further development at the local level.

We recognise, however, that in some areas this will be a struggle without the stimulus and support structure of the Big Local programme and potentially without paid workers to support, encourage and facilitate future activism. Currently, Local Trust provides funding development support which includes fundraising skills and information about funding opportunities. It also puts in place specialist Big Local rep support for partnerships reaching the end of their investment from the programme. Supportive discussions around how Big Locals intend to sustain community engagement and activism will be important in maintaining the resident-led ethos of the programme.

At a broader level, some Big Local areas are themselves working towards a national network, Big Locals Together, that sustains the resident-led change ethos beyond current funding arrangements. It is not yet clear how this will happen and useful learning might be found from previous attempts to maintain networks

after programmes, as well as other resident-led networks, if this initiative is to succeed. Meanwhile, Local Trust continues to make the case for a Community Wealth Fund (see Strong resourceful communities, Gregory/Local Trust, 2018) to continue the work that has been started by the Big Local programme and to support the community-led activity that the government states it would like to see. The Levelling Up White Paper from February 2022, for example, is clear in its summary that:

“Community-led regeneration cannot be achieved with a stop-start funding stream that first builds hope, then destroys it, leaving people less optimistic and trusting, and feeling more disempowered than ever” (HM Government, 2022, p.xxv). Big Local will be a test of this argument over the next 3 years. Ten years plus of investment in hyper-local communities through money and learning support is a rare thing.

All areas will have a legacy of one kind or another, and many will see some succession in terms of activities, services and ways of organising — bringing people together to create change. There will always be individual detractors in the community, as witnessed in a recent social media stream: “Where has all the money from Ramsey Millions gone?” (Spotted: Ramsey, Cambs Group, 2021). It is right that residents should be able to question what is happening in their name, but it was the response to this that proved the worth of Ramsey Million Partnership. Many residents voiced their support for what had been achieved with a great many ‘likes’ given to a long post from a community worker at the locally trusted organisation, which listed many achievements and ended with:

“... beyond the ten years of Ramsey Million local people will continue to pull together. Many people have moved into Ramsey during this time (and more want to come). Why? They see so much going on, they see a community working hard to keep their town vibrant, they see people helping one another – during Covid, during the flood last Christmas; generally, day to day. Long may it continue”.



## 5 Reflections

“What we have seen, or what we have had the chance to experiment with throughout the period of the Big Local grant, is that we have been able to create resident-led bodies around particular issues or themes ... we have been considering what will happen at the end of the Big Local grant.

“So, obviously we lose that element of core funding, we no longer have to be resident-led, but it is in all of our interests to continue to be resident-led and to continue to develop that resident-led infrastructure. So, we will, even through the remainder of the Big Local grant and after the end of it, will continue to use the building to create this space for people to come together to talk about the issues that they feel are important, to find ways to address the things that they feel are important, and also to find the resources, the funding, the money, the income, to make those things happen”.

This quotation from a Big Local worker neatly summarises the challenges of planning for legacy and succession. First there is the emphasis on activities and facilities – but not as isolated stand-alone phenomena. Rather they are the social infrastructure, “the stuff that supports stuff to happen” (Gregory 2018, p. 11). Integral to this is sustaining the resident-led ethos of Big Local – an ethos that integrates not only what happens, but who drives action, who connects things up and drives change.

This integration has been and remains a central challenge for Big Local areas. In some there has been a focus on activities and responses to need which are often valuable but are fragmented and do not make greater connections between activities. More specifically, how are the things done on a day-to-day basis working together to achieve the Big Local goals of making a difference and creating places that are even better to live in?

Conversely there are highly strategic Big Local areas that have struggled at times to connect their longer-term visions with grass roots community engagement. These tensions between activity and

working towards a vision have been inherent since the early days of Big Local (NCVO, 2014). They are even more acute now. Areas are running activities and thinking about their vision, but also working towards how those activities, that vision, will be sustained both financially and in terms of human resources beyond the end of the programme. There are also some that have managed to do both: be grassroots and be strategic at the same time. Critical to this has been the investment of time, energy and resources to nurture people alongside supporting activity (Wilson et al, 2022).

At this stage, with over half of the Our Bigger Story study areas having three to four years’ funding remaining, legacy and succession cannot be guaranteed. There are additional pressures on communities emerging from COVID-19 – not least the rapidly increasing cost of food and utilities. This, combined with further restraints on local government budgets, may push areas into intervening to meet immediate and rising levels of need at the cost of longer-term planning. The move to incorporation as a strategy for income generation may shift some Big Locals from retaining the resident-led ethos to becoming more formalised charitable trusts or community interest companies with more traditional and professionalised governance and management structures.

There are, however, grounds for optimism. Long term funding has secured physical legacies of, for example, community hubs and improved green spaces which would not have happened in any programme with a shorter funding time scale. But it has also built greater momentum for grassroots community activity in most areas over the last decade. Already much of that activity is no longer reliant on Big Local funds and may well be self-sustaining. Investment in nurturing community leadership and networks has built, in some areas, a strong and embedded community-led infrastructure (Wilson et al, 2022). The emphasis on developing indigenous responses to local issues reduces the risk of issues raised in this

research by a number of workers and residents: namely, when the money runs out in place-based initiatives, the external service providers move on.

In the case of Big Local, the test will be whether the Local Trust 2020-2026 [research strategy](#) hypothesis, that 'long term funding and support [has given] ... residents in hyper-local areas agency to take decisions and create positive and lasting change', can be supported. As areas move beyond Big Local funding, Our Bigger Story will have a unique opportunity to follow what happens next in the coming years: who has fallen by the wayside, who has survived, who has thrived – as well as understanding why and how.

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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, Big Local 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 14 films between April 2020 and March 2021:

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](#)

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