



Connections make communities

The National Lottery Community Fund's role
in local infrastructure funding

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Introduction

Communities are bound by their connections. These include intangible connections such as services that bring people together, and tangible connections such as shared community spaces for people to meet. Collectively, the elements that facilitate these connections form a key part of a neighbourhood's community infrastructure. This is vital in terms of supporting the residents of an area to function as a community, with research finding that infrastructure interventions can improve community wellbeing¹ and equip people to actively participate in their communities.²

In this report, we share some of the broad range of ways that we fund community infrastructure and the difference that this funding makes. We look at our support for community businesses to see how they provide jobs and training for residents and help to diversify local economies. We show how our funding has helped residents and groups to take buildings into community ownership to broaden the provision of affordable places to live and work.

We also illustrate how our funding to support shared spaces such as village halls and community centres helps to combat loneliness and isolation, and how accessibility improvements ensure all members of the community can access their shared infrastructure. In the five years from 2016/17 to 2020/21, we've awarded around **£650 million** to support these areas and more.

What do we mean by 'community infrastructure'?

In the broadest sense, community infrastructure refers to all of the physical and service-level provision that allows a community to function. This extends all the way from parks and playgrounds to the systems that support advisory and care services. In this report, however, we're focusing primarily on the physical, practical, tangible infrastructure facilitated by the voluntary and community sector, that communities own, use and share every day. This includes:

- Community businesses: shops, pubs, cafés and other businesses that exist for the benefit of the community and reinvest their profits for local benefit.
- Community buildings: village halls, community centres and other shared, multi-use venues where communities come together to hold events and local meetings.
- Community-owned developments: housing projects, energy stations, leisure centres and other structures that are normally provided by local councils or private companies, which are developed by residents or taken into community ownership to prevent sell-off and to ensure continued provision that meets local needs.

Functioning community infrastructure that addresses local needs is particularly important for a society emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic. As communities across the UK look to embed resilience, capitalise on newly forged bonds and refocus on what's on their doorsteps, there's an increased drive for local ownership and a set of assets in common that provide a sense of place and local pride. We fund the thoughtful design of places and spaces that meet these needs, which are key aspects of wellbeing.³

This report is intended for people who are setting up, commissioning or delivering community infrastructure work, or looking to gain a sense of community priorities to inform place-based work. We've drawn on input and evaluations from grantholders on major programmes like [Big Local](#) and [Power to Change](#), and research into a range of smaller grants to learn about the breadth, variety and focus of community infrastructure work that we fund across the UK.



Making a difference

Funding to support the development of community infrastructure across the UK*

Communities in control

- **589 assets** put into community ownership, such as wind turbines and leisure centres.
- **163 communities put in charge** of how their local areas are developed through Big Local and Invest Local.
- **83,000 acres of land** put into community hands through the Scottish Land Fund.
- **889 community-owned homes built**, 1,282 community businesses supported and £40 million invested in community energy through Power to Change.
- **302 community enterprises** supported during COVID-19.



Places to connect

- **10,000 community spaces** built or improved, making them warmer, more accessible and more sustainable.
- **1,550 community hubs** funded in England and Wales – an average of four per local authority.
- **403 venues made more environmentally friendly** and energy efficient in Northern Ireland through the Energy Efficient Venues programme.



Fuller lives

- **900 accessibility infrastructure projects** funded, such as installing lifts, ramps and accessible toilets.
- **9,800 people engaged in activities** through Space and Place in Northern Ireland, with 83% reporting improved health and wellbeing and 757 increasing their use of community green spaces.
- **49% of people made new friends** while using services put into community ownership through Growing Community Assets in Scotland, with 19% improving their fitness and 17% developing new skills.



*Over the past five years, unless a reference is made to a specific programme.

How we support community infrastructure

We've invested around £650 million of National Lottery, government and third-party funding over the past five years to support the development of community infrastructure across the UK. On top of this we have also made major endowments to set up external trusts such as **£16 million** for the **Invest Local** programme in Wales, and we have run targeted programmes such as the **Scottish Land Fund** which saw us invest **£48.7 million** of Scottish Government money from 2012 to 2020.

Our focus, however, is not just on facilitating community infrastructure for its own sake. Rather, it's about the difference our infrastructure funding makes to the lives of communities. For example, we've supported more than 1,500 community centres and village halls in England and Wales over the past five years, giving small communities a hub to meet, hold events and connect with one another. This has meant £119 million in funding to support an average of four spaces per local authority, at an average of £75,000 in capital costs and £217,000 in revenue costs for each local authority area.

Alongside major developments and new buildings, we also award grants for small improvements to community infrastructure that can have a big impact on people's lives. It's easy to underestimate the importance of new toilets, boilers, roofs and kitchens, but these can make the difference between venues being basic functional spaces or true assets that boost community pride. The evaluation of the first three years of the Invest Local programme noted this, adding that such investments "generally could not be supported by other funding streams",⁴ highlighting the importance of dedicated community infrastructure spending even at the smallest scale.

And of course, community spaces don't just arise through direct grant funding; we also invest in community enterprise, which sparks the creation of public infrastructure, creates employment opportunities, and boosts local economies by providing paying jobs and volunteering opportunities that improve skills. Through a £149 million grant, Power to Change has so far funded over 1,200 community businesses,⁵ helping to make communities better places to live in ways that residents want and need. The programme's 2019 interim evaluation found that "almost all of the businesses funded [...] create spaces for people to come together", and that these were "to create space for people to socialise with each other, combatting social isolation" or "to create spaces where people from different backgrounds can mix, fostering better community cohesion".⁶

Sitting alongside thriving, well-used local hubs, many towns and cities in the UK have a surplus of disused buildings and land, often locked in a cycle of being held in a derelict state and then sold for a profit. These provide an avenue for community infrastructure through community acquisition and ownership. For example in Hastings, building on learning from an earlier National Lottery funded project, [Heart of Hastings Community Land Trust](#) has worked with partners to raise funds to bring almost 8,000 square metres of space in the White Rock neighbourhood into community ownership, offering 10 flats and 40 business spaces for local people at affordable rates. This is an important intervention in a neighbourhood that is both among the 1% most deprived in England⁷ and situated in a town experiencing rapidly rising property prices.⁸

We also help to build and renovate outdoor spaces like parks, playgrounds, sensory gardens and allotments. We haven't covered these in this report, but you can read more about the impact of our parks and green spaces funding in the [Space to Thrive](#)⁹ and [Parks for People](#)¹⁰ reports. This report will focus on the five key community infrastructure impacts mentioned above: jobs and local economies; community ownership; shared spaces; accessibility and diversity; and bringing people together. Community infrastructure is not limited to these areas, but these key impacts give a good overview of why it is important, the breadth and effect of what we fund, and our approach to supporting communities to develop and improve their infrastructure.



Andalus Community Centre

Community infrastructure funding breakdown¹¹

We have awarded £650 million in grants from National Lottery funds and other sources to support community infrastructure over the past five years.¹² This includes:¹³

- 9,782 grants (£565 million) to support building work and renovation.
- 1,829 grants (£119 million) to support 1,550 village halls and community centres.
- 891 grants (£86 million) to provide accessibility infrastructure.
- 589 grants (£71 million) to put assets into community ownership.

We have also funded four major trusts at a total of £394 million, awarding:

- £214 million to Local Trust for Big Local to allow 150 communities in England to invest in their local areas, including adding and improving shared community infrastructure.
- £149 million to Power to Change for the Community Business Fund to support community businesses across England, including developing physical spaces for those businesses to operate.
- £16 million to Building Communities Trust for Invest Local to help 13 communities in Wales improve their local areas, including through creating and restoring community spaces to bring people together.
- £15 million to the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland to run the Space and Place programme, which developed underused community spaces such as youth clubs and women's centres to better serve the needs of local people.

Finally, although this report focuses on the five years from 2016/17 to 2020/21, we have also included boxouts with information from relevant programmes operated wholly or partly outside this date range. Through these five programmes we awarded £198 million in National Lottery and government funds over 14 years, comprising:

- £113.1 million through the Community Assets and Growing Community Assets programmes from 2006 to 2020, to give communities throughout Scotland greater control and ownership of local assets.
- £48.7 million through the Scottish Land Fund from 2012 to 2020, to allow community groups in Scotland to purchase land and buildings for community use.
- £20 million through the Community Asset Transfer programme from 2010 to 2018, to support communities in Wales to take control of their infrastructure to ensure it meets their needs in terms of regeneration and economic sustainability.
- £9.3 million through the COVID-19 Community Led Organisations Recovery Scheme (CCLORS) in 2020, to help community businesses in England that supported those at high risk from COVID-19 during the pandemic.
- £6.9 million through the Energy Efficient Venues programme from 2010 to 2012, to allow communities in Northern Ireland to make efficiency improvements to community venues, making them more sustainable and affordable.

Providing jobs and boosting local economies

We support community enterprises because they work for the benefit of the community, investing profits back into the local area to improve people's lives and address challenges. They also build "social capital, the glue that holds communities together".¹⁴ Much of this takes place through shops, cafés and community centres that become more than just places where money is exchanged for services. "Community businesses provide much needed social infrastructure [and] many start after residents discover their only shop, pub, post office or other local facility is closing", Power to Change explained, with community responses becoming "a one-stop shop or community hub providing crucial services, often over and above basic provision, in response to community needs and wants".

Neighbourhood jobs

Power to Change is our biggest investment in this area, supported by a £149 million endowment starting in 2015. In its first five years, the programme awarded £86 million across 1,938 grants to support 1,282 unique community businesses,¹⁵ including shops, pubs, factories, energy infrastructure and community centres. With two-thirds (67%) of Power to Change funding going to the 30% most deprived areas in England, the programme is making a significant difference to life in communities where infrastructure is fast disappearing, helping to bring communities closer together while providing employment and training opportunities for local people.

Community businesses as a whole provide employment for 37,800 people in England and engage 148,700 volunteers. Our funding contributes to these figures, with Power to Change finding that members of the local community account for an average of 72% of full-time employees, 84% of regular volunteers and 81% of trustees/directors in community businesses the trust supports.¹⁶ Some funded businesses specifically work to employ those who may otherwise face unemployment, either due to a lack of local opportunities or due to support needs, with one grantholder stating that "we give young people employment so that they can stay in this town", and another working with the local authority "to create meaningful work opportunities for people with learning disabilities".

In Norwich, the local community responded to the 2018 closure of the Colman's Mustard factory with a campaign to start [Norwich Mustard](#), aiming to keep mustard production – a key aspect of local identity – in the city. The project raised £6,000 in crowdfunding, which Power to Change matched. It now has 140 member-shareholders and employs “those furthest from the job market” in full-time and voluntary roles, as well as providing training and work experience positions. The group now plans to work with schools to help young people learn about innovative business approaches and how mustard is grown and prepared.

The programme also supports the preservation of community social spaces. In North London, the [Antwerp Arms](#) pub faced closure in 2013, but was bought by the community and developed with support from a £111,500 Power to Change grant in 2017.¹⁷

It is now run as a community business, providing employment and holding a wider role than a traditional pub by offering such services as free lunches for the lonely and charity quizzes, and working with Friends of Bruce Castle Park to improve the local environment. Similarly, in Maidenhead Power to Change supported the [Craufurd Arms Society](#) with £122,500 in grant, bursary and loan funding,¹⁸ allowing the group to purchase its local pub – the Craufurd Arms. The business is now owned by over 200 local members and runs a support group for the parents of autistic children and the Maidenhead Memories elders' group.

Power to Change (England)

From the only shop in the village to a factory providing work where industry has declined, community businesses provide vital infrastructure that sits at the heart of local areas. We launched Power to Change as a charitable trust to support community businesses across England. It assists organisations through every stage of the community business lifecycle by offering a mix of funding, advice and support. From 2015 to 2020, the organisation invested £86 million to support 1,282 community businesses. It has also:

- Helped to grow the community business market in England, which has doubled from around 5,500 to around 11,300.
- Nearly tripled the number of community-owned pubs, from 33 to 95.
- Built 889 community-owned homes.

- Helped community businesses raise £19 million to maintain community ownership of local assets.
- Invested £40 million in community energy.
- Set up the Power to Change Research Institute with a £7.5 million budget, as part of the trust's commitment to building a strong evidence base for the positive impact of community business.¹⁹

Power to Change has also found that community businesses create local employment, volunteering and training opportunities. It has established three consortia that run local community-led housing enablers in Bristol, Birmingham and Leeds, with others in development. The trust has also leveraged an additional £70.3 million into the market, in the form of grants, community shares, crowdfunding and social investment.

Frontline provision

Community enterprises often exist at the heart of their local areas, providing a physical hub for communities that may otherwise lack a recognisable focal point. The Scottish Land Fund, delivered by the Fund in partnership with Highlands and Islands Enterprise, provides Scottish Government grants of up to £1 million to allow communities to take ownership of local land and buildings.



Insole Court

This has facilitated a number of community enterprises, like [Broughton Village Store](#) in the Scottish Borders, which was purchased by Upper Tweed Community Enterprise in 2019 using a £95,000 Scottish Land Fund grant. The shop initially closed in 2018, leaving locals facing a two-hour round trip on a limited bus service to buy groceries, but was purchased by the community after a concerted local campaign. It now employs nine local people and runs community welfare initiatives including free lunches for children during school closures and discounted weekly shops for those in need. The shop received recognition in the High Street Heroes Awards in 2020, and was specifically congratulated in the Scottish Parliament through a motion from local MSP Christine Grahame citing its “valuable work, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic”.²⁰

The pandemic has brought into sharp focus the vital role community enterprises can play as grassroots ports-of-call for local people, while equally threatening the existence of many smaller organisations. Power to Change estimated that from trading losses only, the 9,000 existing community businesses in England as of 2019 would incur a potential deficit of £68 million during the pandemic.²¹ Recognising this, we launched the [COVID-19 Community Led Organisations Recovery Scheme \(CCLORS\)](#) in July 2020. Run by Power to Change, [Locality](#), [Ubele Initiative](#) and [Social Investment Business](#), the £10 million scheme offered grants of up to £100,000 to community businesses across England that support people at high risk from COVID-19, with an emphasis on those led by or supporting members of minority ethnic communities.

COVID-19 Community Led Organisations Recovery Scheme (England)

In response to the challenge posed to community businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic, we launched CCLORS in 2020. Overall, the programme received 1,751 applications, making 302 grants worth a combined £9.3 million to help community enterprises keep running and provide essential community infrastructure and services. Of the successful applicants, 69% were led by members of ethnic minority communities, 86% supported those communities, and:

- 17% supported people who experience loneliness and social isolation.
- 15% provided essential items directly to families who were hit hardest.
- 15% supported children and young people to achieve their potential.
- 15% supported people who experience health inequalities.
- 13% connected with older people.
- 13% supported people who experience poor mental health.
- 8% connected with disabled people.
- 5% provided advice and support to people who were pushed into crisis.

Much of the funding focused on critical community infrastructure, including housing and support hubs. In Sunderland, for example, Back on the Map took ownership of local properties, with the aim of cutting down the amount of low-quality rental housing in the area. During the pandemic, the organisation offered crisis and food support for residents, worked with tenants who weren't able to pay rent, and moved the rental and viewings process online so that the service could continue during lockdown without cutting off vulnerable people.



Andalus Community Centre

Facilitating community ownership

Council-owned facilities and those provided by the voluntary and community sector (VCS) make up much of the infrastructure that helps communities to thrive, but there is also a case for the additional advantages of genuine community ownership. When managed well, the process of acquiring community assets can strengthen community organisations, improve their capacity,²² and help mitigate the impact of economic shifts.

Most importantly, though, community ownership allows for the fullest expression of bottom-up infrastructure design. In Locality's words, it "leverages local enterprise and resident-led action to create solutions for the priorities that matter locally".²³ We fund communities to acquire land and assets that matter to them, and we've supported 589 local groups and partnerships to this end with a combined £71.6 million over the past five years.

Scottish Land Fund (Scotland)

Owning their own infrastructure means communities can shape it to their needs and protect it from market forces that can result in the sale and redevelopment of privately owned assets. We started the Scottish Land Fund in 2001 and the programme has been running in its current form since 2012, providing grants to community groups to purchase land and buildings. From 2012 to 2016, we awarded £9.8 million across 52 projects, putting 83,829 acres of land into community ownership.²⁴ The most recent round, from 2016 to 2020, saw 231 groups and partnerships awarded £38.9 million, with an average grant size of £168,646.

The majority of applications (52%) were for buildings, demonstrating the importance of physical infrastructure to communities across Scotland. Importantly, the programme offers a lifeline to small, isolated communities whose few assets can be extremely precious, with 58% of applications coming from remote rural areas with populations of under 3,000. The programme also helps community groups broaden their income sources, with 70% of successful stage two grantholders securing additional funding, and 82% of those who did so agreeing that their Scottish Land Fund grant influenced this.²⁵

Community cornerstones

Big Local and Invest Local are local investment programmes that see 150 communities in England and 13 communities in Wales given at least £1 million to spend however they like over 10-15 years. In 2017, [Northfleet Big Local](#) took over the Ebbsfleet Rainbow Centre from the local Methodist church, preventing it being sold to a private buyer by keeping it in public ownership and investing over £10,000 to refurbish it.²⁶ It now serves as a home for community groups, a hireable space, and a base for activities such as over-50s pilates, youth music sessions and repair workshops.

Similarly in Plas Madoc in Wales, the local leisure centre was closed in 2014, the local authority deeming it unsustainable. The local community came together to launch [Splash Community Trust](#) in order to take over the lease from the council, and Plas Madoc Leisure Centre is now run for the benefit of the community. The centre has 44 employees and 15 volunteers, with a turnover of £850,000, making it a key element of the local economy.²⁷ We Are Plas Madoc, the Invest Local steering group for the area, now runs a range of community events from the centre, including a brunch club and a youth club, and Splash Community Trust was named Welsh Social Enterprise of the Year at the [2018 Social Business Wales Awards](#).

Of course, community-owned infrastructure that helps neighbourhoods to thrive depends on there being a community in the first place. Gentrification and demographic changes can sometimes mean that established communities find themselves gradually priced out of the areas they call home. We fund community land trusts and housing projects to ensure communities in this position can provide affordable places to live and keep their communities together with a better quality of life. [Staffin Community Trust](#), for example, was awarded £231,700 through the Scottish Land Fund to purchase land to build affordable houses, business units and a shop on Skye.

[North Ormesby Big Local](#) set up a community land trust in order to bring six vacant local properties into community ownership, with the aim of making the community a better place to live.²⁸ Working with local partners to the same end, the group also supported work to give over 160 local homes a facelift. This included painting the facades and steps, painting the window frames and sills, repairing the pipes, and cleaning PVC elements. Partner organisation Community Campus employed local staff to carry out the work, and four young people were given apprenticeships.



Insole Court

Community Asset Transfer (Wales)

Community ownership of assets allows people to retain their critical infrastructure and ensure that it continues to meet local priorities, which is particularly important during economic downturns. In collaboration with the Welsh Government, we ran the Community Asset Transfer programme in Wales from 2010 to 2018, helping communities to regenerate and build economic sustainability. In total, we awarded £20 million in funding to 23 full projects (between £600,000 and £1.1 million) and 15 development projects (up to £50,000).

Local energy

Shared ownership of critical assets like housing and village halls is an important path to, as the Local Government Association puts it, “all sections of the community [having] an equal stake in its success and future”.²⁹ As environmental awareness has increased, another category has emerged – local energy generation. The Udney Community Turbine in Aberdeenshire, for example, was among the first wholly community-owned and operated wind turbines of its kind on the Scottish mainland, and has generated over £120,000 in income. Over its 20-year lifespan, the £1.45 million turbine is expected to generate up to £5 million in profit – that’s £2,000 for every resident of Udney Green and Pitmedden, the villages that benefit from this National Lottery funded project.

Similarly, on Muck in the Inner Hebrides we awarded just under £1 million for a community-owned electricity generation scheme, allowing the island to enjoy affordable, reliable 24-hour energy from sustainable sources.

Insole Court Trust was established to take ownership of Insole Court, a Grade II listed Victorian mansion in Cardiff, through a long-term lease. A £761,724 grant allowed the trust to repair the stables for community and educational functions, restore the gardens, and convert adjacent outbuildings into a visitor centre and tea rooms. The venue now runs yoga classes, children’s dance classes, plant sales and theatre shows, among other events, putting this Victorian Gothic mansion into public use and ownership.

Similarly, Towy Community Church Trust was awarded £798,202 to fund the acquisition of a redundant former cheese packing plant in Carmarthenshire and its conversion into a community hub. The project has created 39 jobs and has 100 volunteers, running such services as clothes and furniture recycling and a bowling alley. So far, 300 items of clothing and 400 pieces of furniture have been given away, with 8,624 people in crisis helped since the project started.

The grant funded the installation of six wind turbines, alongside associated photovoltaic arrays, battery storage, a back-up generator and electrical infrastructure, delivering electricity from over 90% renewable sources. This has allowed community events to take place at convenient times that people can attend, rather than being timed for when power would be available. Local people also helped to assemble wind turbines and, over the grant period (2013-17), four new jobs were created, seven local residents were trained to operate and maintain the power scheme, and the island’s population rose by 40%.

Building and renovating shared spaces

Buildings are one of the most tangible, visible parts of community life. Grants to make these spaces sustainable, accessible, comfortable and welcoming are a huge part of what the National Lottery Community Fund does, and this spans a range of work. A building can be made more accessible, in the broadest sense, by making it warmer and cleaner, with updated amenities like kitchen spaces.

Similarly, new features like bigger halls and additional rooms allow community buildings to offer a broader selection of activities, making the space feel relevant to more people in the community. We have awarded over £565 million in National Lottery funds and money from other sources to support almost 10,000 building work and renovation projects over the past five years.

Iterative approach

While refurbishments like new heating systems, accessible bathroom facilities and external repairs may seem small, they can make a significant difference to a community's experience of its shared buildings. Invest Local noted in an evaluation that “the investments made in, for example, buildings and boilers, may not always appear glamorous, but they reflect the community's priorities [and] strengthen communities' assets”.³⁰

Energy Efficient Venues (Northern Ireland)

Talking about community infrastructure often brings to mind major new developments and building projects, but minor upgrades to the quality, efficiency and sustainability of existing infrastructure can make just as much difference to a community's experience. We ran the Energy Efficient Venues programme from 2010 to 2012, awarding £6.9 million in grants up to £50,000 to 403 community organisations across Northern Ireland to carry out improvements to venues to make them more environmentally friendly and energy efficient.

Community Recreational Arts in Coalisland received £44,919 to install a new heating system and porch to reduce heat loss in its theatres, while Dunnygarron Cultural Society in Cullybackey was awarded £46,723 to insulate and draught-proof its community hall, as well as adding new windows, doors, boilers and lighting. The programme also funded more innovative solutions, such as Boho Cross Community Association near Enniskillen using its grant of just under £50,000 to install a photovoltaic energy system on the roof of its community venue.

The Office for National Statistics has made a similar observation, including “having a safe, clean and pleasant environment, access to facilities and being part of a cohesive community” among its measures of national wellbeing.³¹

We fund a range of practical projects in this vein, with smaller local organisations in particular turning to us to help keep their community infrastructure in good shape. Kitchen refurbishments, for example, allow venues to launch lunch clubs, offer healthy cooking classes, and run café services to generate income, as in the case of [South Penlan Community Centre](#) in Swansea.

Alongside improving existing facilities, adding additional rooms and spaces can significantly expand a venue's functions, as we funded [Charter House Activity Centre](#) in Burnley to do; a relocated and remodelled sensory room for people with learning and physical disabilities allowed the organisation to provide a safe and stimulating environment for visitors, carers and families.

Simple improvements to the warmth and comfort of a venue can also yield results, making it more attractive, accessible and environmentally friendly. In 2018, the [Royal British Legion](#) refurbished the windows and boiler at the [Allestree Club](#) in Derby, reducing running costs by 45%, while [Plas Madoc Leisure Centre](#) – funded through Invest Local – saved almost £20,000 in running costs each year by replacing its boilers.³² Similarly, Ballyrashane Parish Hall used a grant of £37,441 to make its hall warmer, cut heating and lighting bills, and solve the problem of condensation making the floor slippery and preventing older people from feeling safe.

Big Local (England)

Big Local is the Fund's single biggest endowment and the largest ever investment outside of government funding in place-based, resident-led change. The chosen areas represent parts of the country that have been overlooked for funding and resources in the past, and face such challenges as high unemployment and declining local industry.

Each Big Local area has until 2026 to spend £1.1 million, with residents in charge of deciding how the money is spent. Each year, across 150 areas, more than 1,600 local people are directly involved in the governance of their Big Local. Up to a third of those who join Big Local have never been involved in community volunteering in the past. Previously partnerships might have spent just 40% of their planned expenditure, but as they learn new budgeting skills, the figure typically rises to between 80 and 90%.³³

Many Big Local areas have focused on infrastructure, such as Lawrence Weston, located on a post-war housing estate in Bristol. The project invested in a new housing development on a derelict part of the estate, which breathed new life into the area. A new Lidl branch has now been built nearby, and the community worked with Bristol Energy Cooperative to install a 4,319MWh solar farm in 2016, generating enough energy to power 1,000 homes per year.

Collyhurst in Manchester, a Big Local area since 2013, has taken a similar approach in terms of making use of available land. The area had very few shops or community facilities, following a long period of deindustrialisation and rising unemployment. The Big Local partnership audited and acquired empty buildings and land, bought land next to empty shop units through a housing stock clearance, and acquired a set of shipping containers. Together, these have been turned into a business incubation space, hosting a furniture upcycling business, a community café and an organic food growing operation.³⁴

Grand designs

Of course, there are times when a small change is not enough and a building is deemed unfit for purpose. In Wereham this was the case with the [local village hall](#). An inspection determined that the existing wooden hall, dating from the First World War, was structurally unsound. We awarded £668,421 for a replacement structure, which was built following over two years of consultation with locals and potential users.



Andalus Community Centre

The new building is the UK's first accredited Passivhaus village hall, with the architect declaring it "a new exemplar national beacon of an environmentally sustainable Passivhaus community building".³⁵ It can be hired out by local community groups and businesses, and hosts a range of activities that support physical, social and mental wellbeing. These include yoga and pilates classes, dance and drama groups, and craft and social clubs. The building also generates its own revenue through a village hall café, allowing for financial sustainability.

Similarly, in Burton Pidsea in Yorkshire we awarded £500,000 for a complete renovation of the local [Memorial Hall](#). The local community had started work on this already, as the hall had serious structural problems limiting its use. However, the problems turned out to be more serious than they first thought, with immediate steelwork installation required to support the main hall, rotten wooden walls and window frames, a leaking roof and cracked flooring. Our award allowed the essential work to take place and, within just six months of the newly renovated hall being open, it had already hosted dances, community teas, more than 10 parties, a corporate conference, an art show, a remembrance event and at least 18 other events. After a year, 63 events had been held, with strong rates of attendance; the monthly film show, for example, attracted a first-year average attendance of 50 people.

Improving accessibility

Providing new or updated features can serve a community well in an ‘if you build it, they will come’ sense, but to reach the whole community and be truly welcoming, a shared space must be accessible.

Older community buildings can lack facilities for those with disabilities or for parents with babies, for example, so we have funded lifts, ramps and accessible toilets, among other improvements, to open these community spaces to everyone. Over the past five years, we’ve awarded over £86 million across nearly 900 accessibility infrastructure projects.

In Selkirk, for example, we supported [Our Lady and St Joseph’s Roman Catholic Church](#) to add a new toilet to its church hall, with disabled access and baby changing facilities. It’s a small-scale improvement, but for a new parent it could be the difference between taking part in community activities or staying at home.

While making buildings more physically accessible is essential, it’s also important to consider a wider range of adaptations and ways of working to ensure that places and spaces are genuinely inclusive and welcoming in the broadest sense. As well as working to address loneliness and isolation through village halls, Community First has produced guidance on making venues [dementia-friendly](#) through considering how the design and layout of a building can make it more accessible.³⁶

Tips include avoiding polished floors that may look wet or slippery, minimising unnecessary noise and providing orientation signage, all of which help people with dementia but also generally make buildings more accessible to people with sensory impairments and may help those who are anxious or shy in public places to feel more at ease. In other words, as Community First puts it, dementia-friendly village halls also offer “much broader benefits [such as] accessibility for those with hearing impairments or other disabilities”.

Space and Place (Northern Ireland)

The Space and Place programme, operated on the Fund’s behalf by the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, ran from 2013 to 2018. It invested £15 million to help communities develop local spaces that were underused, in order to make them more relevant and appealing to local people, with improved health and wellbeing the overall goal. Burren Vision in Newry, for example, used a £346,008 grant to rebuild a 40-year-old youth club into a new facility to appeal to the wider community across neighbouring towns. Killylea Silver Band used a £339,573 grant to regenerate a derelict school building into a community hall.

In total, 9,800 people took part in activities, events or programmes run through Space and Place, with 83% reporting improved health and wellbeing. The programme also worked to make facilities more attractive and accessible to a diverse range of people from different community backgrounds. By 2018, 757 people had increased their use of community green spaces through the programme and 10,323 noted improvements in social cohesion and local diversity, with 13% of those surveyed stating that this reduced their fear of crime and anti-social behaviour.³⁷

Combatting isolation and bringing people together

The community infrastructure we fund is designed to facilitate connections – that means bringing people together. Community hubs and shared spaces give people access to opportunities and activities that encourage interaction.

This can contribute to a sense of neighbourliness and can help improve trust, local pride and social cohesion – all aspects of social capital, which is key to a strong, connected community. Community hubs help to broaden networks and reduce loneliness and isolation. For example, in Clase, the Invest Local group set up a weekly breakfast morning to help bring people together. Using just £50 of funding, it is now self-sustaining and has grown into a community one-stop shop with a local housing officer attending to give advice, a collection point for the local credit union, and a food bank started by local residents before being taken over by the group to manage increasing demand.

In Hubberston and Hakin, the Invest Local community came together to lease a recently-closed Pembrokeshire Country Council building in 2016. The building was officially transferred to the community in 2018, and is now a thriving hub used by 300 people every week, with activities including exercise classes for people with long-term health conditions and a lunch club for older people.³⁸

Building social capital

Big Local has found that having shared places to meet and deliver projects is critical to those projects' success. Often, the Big Local projects that have struggled to establish an identity in an area are those without access to a community centre or similar shared meeting space.³⁹ [Ambition for Ageing](#) in Greater Manchester reviewed academic literature on the role shared spaces have in contributing to communities, suggesting that a variety of infrastructure is beneficial because different types of places contribute to creating different types of social capital – bonding and bridging.⁴⁰ Bonding capital is built when we interact with people who share personal characteristics like faith, disability, being parents or a shared interest or hobby. Bridging capital is important because it creates networks and relationships across and between diverse people and groups.

We funded [Andalus Community Centre](#) in Sheffield to help the local African and Arab communities build social bonding capital by way of coming together to support one another through boosting employability, supporting recent migrants to achieve self-sufficiency, and providing networking opportunities to bring the communities closer together.

Through our funding, the organisation has hired managers, advocacy and support workers, and administrators to bring people together through: CV and interview skills sessions; computer and internet access; translation services; English language classes; social groups for elderly and young community members; and assistance in finding work for community members who are single parents, elderly, or have learning difficulties.

This support has allowed the community centre to serve as a bulwark against some of the impacts of the pandemic, helping two minority ethnic communities stay together during a particularly isolating time.

We also support social bridging capital, bringing a broad range of people together to develop new connections. We funded [Larne Community Care Centre](#) in Northern Ireland to run the Link project, supporting older people in the Larne area who are isolated or in ill health – a shared situation, but not a shared identity.

Prior to COVID-19 affecting the project's plans midway through its second year, the centre had already welcomed over 1,000 participants to its various events, including choir sessions, breakfast clubs and cinema trips. With lockdown in place, the organisation still managed to make over 500 support interventions such as delivering food parcels and flower baskets, or calling to check on clients, demonstrating the importance of locally rooted social infrastructure when unexpected challenges arise.

Growing Community Assets and Community Assets (Scotland)

We ran the Growing Community Assets programme in Scotland from 2006 to 2016, followed by Community Assets from 2016 to 2020. Both programmes aimed to give communities across Scotland more control and influence over their futures through the ownership and development of local assets. Overall, the programmes invested £106.9 million in capital and revenue funding across 219 projects, as well as £6.2 million in development funding.

Many funded projects focused on developing or renovating shared community spaces that serve as local hubs. Dalmally Community Company was awarded planning permission for a new community hall, which opened in 2012. Early attendance demonstrated the value of the project: from a population of just 350 people, 100 attended a village ceilidh, 150 attended a fireworks display, and an estimated 150 people were using the hall regularly for activities one year after opening.

On the island of Foula in the Shetlands, Foula Electricity Trust was funded to develop a wind turbine project. Prior to the project, Foula had no reliable power supply, but is now self-sufficient.

A survey of Growing Community Assets projects after the first stage found that around 36,000 people across Scotland were using community-owned services and facilities funded through the programme. The main individual benefits highlighted in the survey were: making new friends and contacts (49%), saving money (28%), developing new skills (17%) and improving physical fitness (19%). At the time, there were over 700 people involved in project management across 81 operational projects, and around 1,700 regular volunteers.

The built environment as an agent for change

Functioning infrastructure that serves local needs is absolutely vital for creating and maintaining connected, strong communities. Our funding facilitates this by putting communities in the lead, as we have explored, helping VCS and grassroots groups drive the infrastructure agenda through community ownership, meeting gaps in the local market, or bringing shared spaces up to scratch.

Moving forward, this approach can become more than the sum of its parts, going beyond meeting immediate local needs to start addressing many of the systemic and existential issues we face as a society. The Climate Change Committee, for example, has highlighted how community ownership of energy infrastructure could be vital for overcoming local negativity and perceptions of 'being done to'. In a blog post on Westmill Wind Farm, the UK's first fully community-owned wind farm, Senior Analyst Indra Thillainatha noted: "A second co-op was established to expand activities on the farm with the installation of a solar farm [...] a noticeable aspect of the solar farm scheme was that it received no objections during the planning application stage, evidence, perhaps, that the experience of the community-owned wind farm had addressed any general concerns."⁴¹

A report from the London School of Economics has similarly highlighted how community businesses could be the solution to failing high streets hit hard by COVID-19. "Community managed businesses can achieve benefits, such as increased customer loyalty, which allow them to succeed where commercial businesses do not," the report noted. This is alongside other benefits, including serving as 'destination locations' to increase footfall, appealing to a diverse customer base by targeting underserved groups, and building resilience by taking on wider stewardship for the local area beyond profit making. Hebden Bridge Town Hall – one of the UK's few community-owned civic centres – is a good example of this latter point, with the report highlighting its "important role in the town's recovery from major flooding events in 2012, 2015 and 2020".⁴²

The National Lottery Community Fund will continue to play an important role in this ongoing process, by helping communities to shape their critical infrastructure as they need and want. As new approaches emerge, we aim to keep pace with community innovation, helping a local-focused vision for wider society to take root across the UK through community infrastructure of all shapes and sizes.

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