Power Partnerships

Learning on localism with four local authorities

locality

the power of community

Contents

Tony Armstrong, Locality

When we published the findings from the Commission on the Future of Localism in 2018, it was to local leaders that we looked to with our recommendations. At a time of political upheaval and legislative lockdown, we didn't focus on Westminster-led change. Instead we called for a new Power Partnership to flourish between local government and local people.

We are delighted to present the findings from this year-long action research project, working with local authorities and community organisations to explore how to reinvigorate localism from the bottom-up. There is huge learning from working with councils who are ambitious about community control, building local capacity and rebalancing power between citizen and state.

We are grateful for the support from Power to Change and Local Trust in making this work possible. Our appreciation also goes to our local authority and community partners who have worked with us throughout this project, sharing their insight, learning and challenges so openly with us.

Vidhya Alakeson, Power to Change

Communities across the country face serious challenges. Over a fifth of the population is lonely and socially disconnected, and mental health issues are on the rise. People can't afford to live in good homes or pay their energy bills, and healthy food is out of reach for many. Our high streets are full of empty shops and inequality is stark between different places.

But communities are pulling together to address these issues by running businesses that create opportunities for local people. At Power to Change we're here to make sure more people in more places feel the benefit of these amazing community businesses. So far, we have invested £60 million in over 1,000 businesses and we have engaged with thousands more through research,

advocacy and policy work at very local, regional and national levels.

Having worked with our partners at Locality on last year's Commission on the Future of Localism, we were delighted to be asked to support this follow-on project to test what needs to be done to drive a genuine shift in power from local authorities to local people. Their report sets out an agenda that is both bold and practical. It presents exciting new opportunities for community businesses to work with councils to transform local places and the lives of those who live there.

Matt Leach, Local Trust

Local Trust delivers Big Local, one of the most exciting and innovative programmes ever launched by a major Lottery funder. Between 2010-26, over £1.1m of funding has been committed to each of 150 communities across England. What makes Big Local radically different is that local residents control the money and make all the decisions on how it is spent.

Across England, Big Local has helped communities launch a myriad of individual projects, take on and improve critically important community assets and build strong new partnerships to improve their neighbourhoods. But, most importantly, Big Local has provided compelling evidence of how placing funds, power and decision-making directly in the hands of local people can transform their relationships with statutory agencies and local government.

We are grateful that residents from three Big Local areas were able to participate in this action research. Their experiences contributed to the case – strongly made in this report – for local and national government to commit funding to strengthening community capacity and investing in social infrastructure, as an essential ingredient for delivering a localism that works for local people.

01. Executive summary

In 2018, we published 'People Power', the findings from the national Commission on the Future of Localism.[i] Chaired by Lord Kerslake, the Commission brought together politicians, community leaders and academics to consider how to reinvigorate localism and unlock the power of community.

The Commission found that the "fundamental shift of power" promised by the Localism Act 2011 has not yet been achieved. Systemic power imbalances, top-down decision-making and a lack of control over local levers and resources has restricted the potential of localism. The hollowing out of community infrastructure through years of austerity has also made it harder to mobilise the localism agenda.

The Commission found that very often it is the actions at a local authority level which make the biggest impact in creating the environment for localism to flourish. Councils who are ambitious about strengthening the power of community are leading the way: building local capacity, embracing coproduction and community delivery, and devolving power and resources to neighbourhoods.

Changes at a national level remain vital to restructuring our centralised political and economic systems. But a technocratic approach to localism will only achieve so much. So our Commission didn't just call for another blockbuster Localism Bill or Westminster-led process of decentralisation. Instead we called for a genuine shift in cultures and behaviours at a local level. We called for a new 'power partnership' to flourish between local government and local people.

—

Power partnerships: action research with local authorities

Over the past year, we have been working in four places, Cornwall, Southwark, Stevenage and Wigan, to test our findings from the Localism Commission and implement our recommendations in practice.

Our action research partners included councillors, council officers and community organisations in each area. Our research with Par Bay Big Local, South Bermondsey Big Local and Leigh Neighbours, also involved interviews with residents in these neighbourhoods. Through interviews, roundtables, local and national workshops, we have learned more about how councils can drive forward a radical new localism agenda. In partnership we have sought to strengthen existing practice and find opportunities to go further.

The four pillars of localism

1 Relationships for localism:
requires embracing 'risk' and establishing trust and partnership in communities, local leaders acting as facilitators for community expertise, and disrupting hierarchies.

2 Institutions for localism:
ensuring healthy local governance, integrated within wider systems of governance, so that power 'sticks' to neighbourhoods.

3 Capacity for localism:
strengthening community infrastructure and opportunities to participate, including community development and spaces for participation.

4 Powers for localism:
strengthening the national framework for community power and ensuring there are the levers and resources to take action locally.

Our research has used the framework for localism developed through our Localism Commission to guide our analysis. The Localism Commission found that in order to strengthen community power, action is required across four pillars of localism: relationships; institutions; capacity; and powers. We have stress tested these pillars in our four areas with communities and councils and found that they continue to resonate as an important tool for examining the strength of local power.

Local government can have the biggest impact in shaping the relationships, institutions and capacity required for localism. Our project has therefore been focused on these three pillars. However, we also conclude this report with recommendations on the role of national government in shaping the fourth pillar – the powers for localism.

This report provides a summary of the key lessons from our action research. We have also published the detailed findings from each area in four online reports. These include findings from Cornwall, Southwark, Stevenage and Wigan on: their strategies for localism and how they've embedded them; case-studies of community organisations; and key recommendations on the future of community power in these four areas. You can read more at locality.org.uk/power-partnerships

01. Executive Summary

–

How can local authorities drive forward a radical new localism agenda?

The local authorities we worked with are all at different points in their localism journey. Governance structures and levels of local ownership, delivery and decision-making vary. However, in these different contexts there is a common thread of learning about how to create a genuine shift in power through localism.

1   **Co-create the vision.** Local authorities often have specific drivers for localism aligning to corporate strategies – from service provision, to community resilience. Political and strategic commitment is vital. But to transform long-term relationships with residents, the localism vision should be co-created with communities and put neighbourhoods in the lead.

2   **Match the ambition with internal change.** Councils should ensure that a strong vision for localism is backed up by internal organisational practice. This will often require a whole-system change; comprehensive staff engagement and training; place-based working to cut through service silos; and embedding localism in KPIs across all departments.

3   **Map community assets and governance capacity.** Supporting communities to own and run key local assets, services and plans is a core part of localism. The appetite and capabilities for this will vary in different areas. Local authorities should map neighbourhood governance, assets and participation, to understand the potential for local ownership and delivery. Building organisational capabilities and community development should target 'cold spot' areas.

4   **Invest directly in community infrastructure.** Building the long-term capacity for localism requires nurturing local organisations and social infrastructure. Strategic support can be through direct grants, access to capital investment, community asset transfer (CAT), commissioning, and supporting community businesses in the local economy.

5   **Embed a 'power partnership' approach throughout engagement and local decision making.** This requires using participatory methods, coproduction and providing opportunities for transfer of power and ownership to communities. See more of our learning on page 14.

6   **Provide flexible funding for local social action.** Small pots of funding to support local events and community projects has a powerful impact in creating networks and community belonging. These are the building blocks for further community action and have a snowballing effect in the local community. This also includes funding for community organising and community development in areas where engagement is low.

02. About the areas

Cornwall

Key facts

Governance: Unitary council created in 2009. 213 town and parish councils.

Political make-up: Liberal Democrat-Independent Coalition.

Population: Over 560,000, and the largest rural unitary authority in England.

Background to our research

Localism in Cornwall is advanced. Over 100 communities across Cornwall have had assets devolved to local ownership, and 80% of parishes have local service agreements.

There are also 19 Community Network Panels for parish and town councils across the county to drive local priorities and develop joint strategies, each supported by Cornwall Council's localism team.

There are also 4,500 VCSE organisations, building local power through community development, service provision, community ownership and enterprise.

Through our action research we explored:

- How Cornwall Council have embedded their localism approach and the culture change that has been required.

- How parishes have responded to devolution and how this has shaped delivery models, local capacity and place-based working.

- How VCSE organisations are driving localism agendas in Cornwall.

Professor Jane Wills of Exeter University, and Localism Commissioner, has also carried out a research piece about the experience of local councils in Cornwall, as a contribution to our project: 'A new geography of local government: the changing role of Town and Parish Councils in the UK'.[ii]

Southwark

Key facts

Governance: London Borough.

Political make-up: Labour majority.

Population: Over 314,000 – projected to grow by 20% by 2030.

Background to our research

Southwark Council has undergone a number of recent changes relevant to localism including:

- A newly established Place and Wellbeing Department to support a closer alignment of priorities for communities and regeneration.

- A review of neighbourhood governance to reform local area committees (Community Councils), and a community engagement review.

Southwark has a vibrant community sector. There are 1,200 registered VCSE organisations, with a further estimated 4,000 grassroots organisations and over 400 faith organisations in the borough.

Through our action research we explored:

- How Southwark Council has sought to strengthen relationships and local democracy through a new community engagement strategy and reform of neighbourhood governance.

- How VCSE organisations are strengthening community power and resetting the power balance from the bottom up.

Stevenage

Key facts

Governance: District council within Hertfordshire County Council.

Political make-up: Labour majority.

Population: Over 89,000.

Background to our research

As a Co-operative Council[iii] and the first New Town in the UK, Stevenage has history founded on the principles of self-help and mutual support. Their current strategy for communities is based on putting co-operative principles at the heart of resident engagement.

This includes their Co-operative Neighbourhood Management Programme to drive regeneration plans across the town, which is also part of the DCMS Enabling Social Action programme.[iv]

Stevenage's 14 community centres are also currently undergoing reform to become financially sustainable, an impetus for them to develop their community relationships and role as hubs in their neighbourhoods.

Through our action research we explored:

- How Stevenage Council takes a neighbourhood approach to supporting community participation and engagement.

- The role of community centres as hubs for local participation, strengthening the capacity for localism and resident involvement.

Wigan

Key facts

Governance: Unitary council within Greater Manchester.

Political make-up: Labour majority.

Population: Over 317,000.

Background to our research

The Wigan Deal is an agreement between the council, businesses and communities to work in partnership to create a better borough. A key aim is to enable more confident communities and support residents to do more by growing local capacity and strengthening VCSE networks.

The 'Community Investment Fund' has put £10m into VCSE initiatives across the borough since 2013, to develop community capacity. A programme of community asset transfer (CAT) is also strengthening community power through models of local ownership and enterprise.

Through our action research we explored:

- How the Wigan Deal has been embedded across the whole council, and the change in culture and behaviours required.

- How the Wigan Deal has strengthened capacity and built a partnership approach with VCSE organisations and communities.

03. Why we need a new Power Partnership

When we published 'People Power' in 2018, we argued that our overly centralised political and economic systems in the UK needed urgent reform. The Brexit vote had provided a compelling need for greater localism. In order to tackle the alienation that has been growing for decades, we needed to re-examine where power lies.

While our future long-term international relationships are far from settled, the imperative for a new power settlement at a local level is stronger than ever. Recent government policy statements have recognised the importance of strengthening the power of community – from the Civil Society Strategy[v] to the Communities Framework.[vi] But as yet these remain piecemeal commitments, rather than wholescale reform. Similarly, the increased focused on 'levelling up' investment in our towns and 'left behind' communities shows a welcome re-direction in our economic policy. But what's missing is how communities currently excluded from prosperity can themselves have greater ownership and control over the future for their areas.

Resetting the power balance between citizen and state is a vital part of tackling the biggest questions we face as society - from public service reform, to the climate crisis. As the New Local Government Network's (NLGN) 'Community Paradigm' argues: "At a time when people are increasingly clamouring for a say over the big decisions that affect their lives, paradigms that enshrine hierarchy or see citizens only as atomised consumers will add to a growing sense of alienation and frustration with public services and the state." The potential of 'people power' will only truly flourish if our leaders and institutions – both nationally and locally – pay attention to reversing our traditional power hierarchies.

Local government is at the forefront of the change we need. As austerity has squeezed local budgets,[vii] some councils have turned to localism to unlock community capacity in local services and keep valuable local spaces thriving through community ownership. But while localism is often underpinned by pragmatic drivers, it is the relational changes which can have the most transformative impact.

Through this project, we've been able to learn from local authorities, communities and local organisations who are driving this change. All are at various stages and operating in very different contexts. The insights which they've shared and their open reflections on their challenges has been enlightening. By sharing their learning in this report, and in the accompanying case studies published online, we aim to provide a roadmap for other local authorities.

04. Relationships for localism

Our Localism Commission findings emphasised the fundamental role that changes in local authority relationships, behaviours and ways of working can have in enabling the power of community to flourish. Councils who embrace community expertise and cultivate capacity within communities can reset the 'power balance' between citizen and state. This can unlock major benefits in terms of the increased civic participation and community innovation which comes from 'letting go' and enabling community-led ventures thrive.

All four areas faced very different drivers for this culture change. In Cornwall, the creation of the unitary authority and dissolution of district councils in 2009 provided the momentum for localism. But wider culture change has been required to unlock the benefits of community empowerment and build trust between tiers of governance. In Wigan, while the origins of the 'Wigan Deal' were necessitated by austerity, the path to transformation required changing the relationship between the public sector and communities.

For Southwark Council, as a rapidly growing diverse urban borough, ensuring the council remains connected with its communities is not just about having the right mechanisms in place for engagement. It is also about the right relationships and partnerships in the VCSE and faith sectors to support this. In Stevenage, as a Cooperative Council the principles of self-help and mutual support have been the key drivers in transforming their approach to neighbourhood working.

Throughout our research we heard that a genuine commitment to localism and community power requires a whole-system change. Empowering political leadership and a strong strategic vision is vital. However, the core challenge is in shifting organisational behaviours and practices from a 'risk management' approach to one focused on enabling thriving communities through partnership. This requires ensuring that new ways of working are embedded across the whole organisation.

Council officers and councillors reflected on some of the challenges of this whole-system approach to localism in practice. Siloed working between different services and departments is a key barrier. For officers in community engagement and localism teams, the biggest challenge can be in influencing the practices and behaviours of colleagues in other departments. This can be a particular challenge where there is not a clear framework for what localism means in practice and how all teams should contribute to these objectives.

We also heard that these challenges are exacerbated when officers do not have the permissions or freedom to adopt localist policies or work innovatively with communities. In addition, when strategic level commitment to community empowerment is not backed up by operational practice, we heard that the pressures of financial targets can skew decision-making away from localism.

–
Leadership from the top

A clear strategy to support greater localism and high-level political leadership is vital. For example, in Wigan this leadership was pivotal to embedding the 'Wigan Deal' values and behaviours. We heard how staff felt empowered with the 'freedom to innovate', work differently with communities and embrace some of the perceived risks of taking a more community-based approach.

Leadership from the top can also help to break through the stubborn silos and barriers which prevent a more localist approach. We heard about the importance of senior directors and cabinet members, to be accountable for localism and to advocate for change at a senior and political level. This can include having the senior authority to shift the way risk is perceived by the council, including legal and financial risk management, and to implement locality working to practically break through silos.

–
Embedding change across the organisation

Empowering leadership needs to be backed up with tangible organisational change. For the Wigan Deal, this involved an HR programme, with 'Deal' values and behaviours embedded throughout recruitment, appraisal and training. This has also fostered a sense of staff pride and ownership in the Wigan Deal.

In Cornwall, a key part of embedding localism has been the team of localism officers who work 'horizontally' across different services. They create the connections and convene local knowledge to support place-based working.

From council officers across our action research areas we heard about the importance of ensuring that clear objectives for localism are adopted across all directorates and council services. Embedding localism as a key performance indicator can be one way of ensuring that local empowerment is a core responsibility of all functions across the council.

–
Relationships and partnership working with communities

The relational resources for localism were considered highly important by council officers and community stakeholders alike. A culture of openness, honesty and reflectiveness in communications between the council and community were highly prized. From public meetings and community consultations, to detailed negotiations around asset transfer; whichever the point of interaction, these core values were considered key.

In Cornwall, for example, the localism team, working across 19 community networks, have a key role in brokering relationships between parish and town councils and County Hall. In Stevenage, neighbourhood wardens are a key point of interaction between the council and residents in supporting community-led projects.

–
Culture and behaviours at a local level are vital too

It is not just culture change at the municipal level which is required. Local governance structures and VCSE organisations need to work in inclusive and participatory ways, support dynamic accountability, disperse power and develop community leadership at a hyper local level.

–
The vision for localism should be co-created with communities

Learning from across our project demonstrated that councils seeking to set a strategic vision for localism and community power should shape this through ongoing co-creation with neighbourhoods. This vision needs to resonate and connect with communities, be shaped around their priorities and have clear commitments on both sides of the partnership between council and residents. Crucially this is about strengthening community leadership, providing space, capacity and resources for residents to drive change in their own neighbourhoods.

05. A Power Partnership approach to community engagement

Local government relies on community engagement to inform and improve policies, programmes and services, and to increase trust and accountability. Meaningful community engagement should be an opportunity to strengthen community power and influence. But when done badly or tokenistic it can reinforce a sense of powerlessness in communities.

From council officers we have heard about some of the challenges within the community engagement cycle. Too often the process starts from the point of view of risk management; negotiating difficult conversations, presenting unpopular decisions, and defending a rationale of why something 'cannot be done'.

From community organisations, we heard about the frustrations when the parameters of the decision have already been set or engagement has not happened early enough. Or equally frustrations occur when the levers of change or implementation of new solutions and ideas remain firmly in the hands of the local authority.

In our local and national workshops, we discussed some of the relational changes that are required within community engagement; as well as how to ensure structures are meaningful and enabling. One council officer summed up this challenge well:
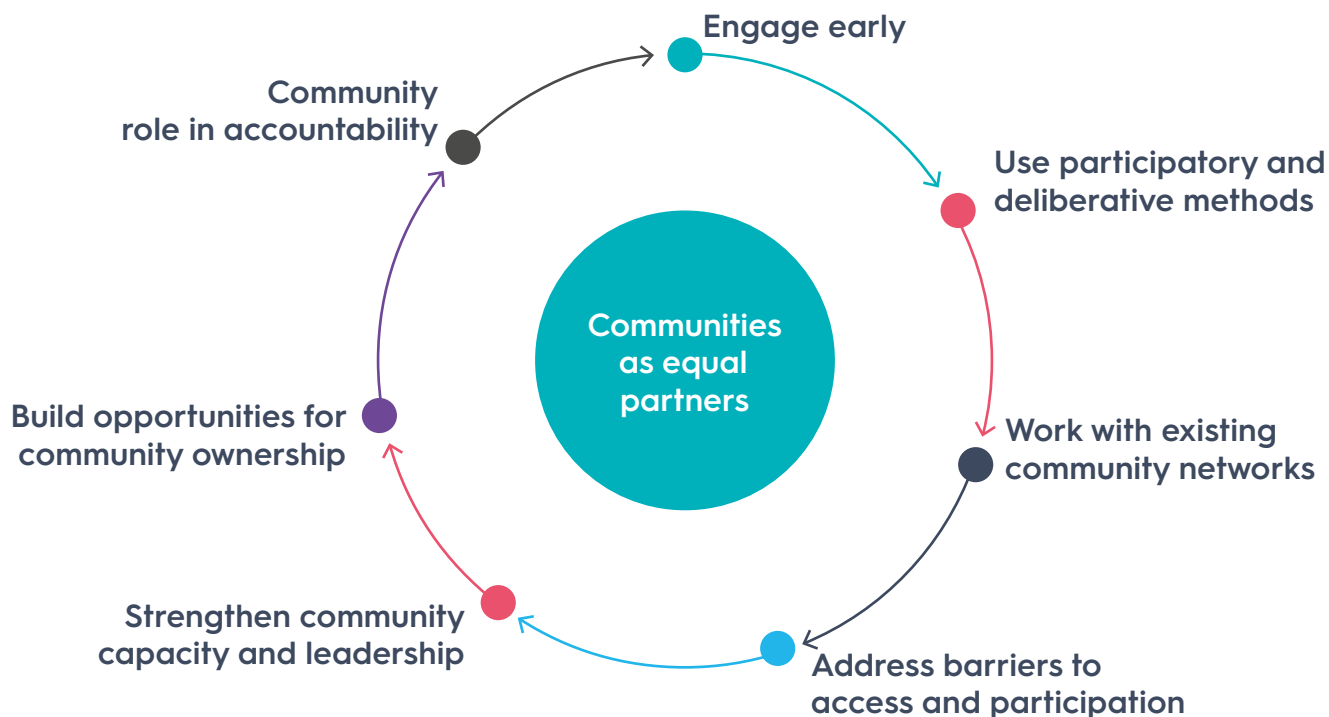
> 66
>
> **We tried to get away from always saying 'we heard what you said, and we've got the solutions', to a more genuine relationship based on bringing about the solutions together."**

We heard how conflict and challenge are a necessary part of the community engagement cycle. But if relationships are genuinely open, honest and reflective about potential disagreements and difficult decisions, then these challenges can be better negotiated to find solutions. Using deliberative engagement techniques and participatory methods can be key to embedding these behaviours at a local level.

Partnering and investing in community organisations and local groups to carry out community development and engagement is also vital. Not as agents of the local authority but as independent actors with skills and expertise in community building, and the trusted relationships with residents.

A framework for the Power Partnership approach

Engage early

Community role in accountability

Use participatory and deliberative methods

Build opportunities for community ownership

Communities as equal partners

Work with existing community networks

Strengthen community capacity and leadership

Address barriers to access and participation

Engage early – involving communities in setting priorities, not just consulting on options.

Use participatory and deliberative methods – which could include using participatory budgeting or a citizen assembly model.

Work with existing networks – mapping local community assets, VCSE organisations and spaces.

Address barriers to access and participation – knowing where engagement is weakest, working with communities to design engagement, and tackling barriers, including income, ethnicity, age, disabilities and language.

Strengthen community capacity and leadership – including through specific funds for capacity building, for example through community organising.

Build opportunities for community ownership – devolve budgets or assets to communities to implement plans, where there is capacity and appetite.

Community role in accountability – build ongoing community scrutiny of decisions and implementation, and provide good quality feedback on how community ideas have been taken forward.

06. Institutions for localism

Our Localism Commission found that localism requires strong neighbourhood institutions for power to 'stick' at a local level and to ensure residents and local organisations have a strong voice and tangible routes for achieving change. While the exact mechanism varies, these forums should have delegated powers and responsibilities, and resources to back this up.

The 'institutional geography' of localism which we have explored varies. For example, in Cornwall, town and parish councils are the key route for devolving services and asset transfer. In Southwark, until recently, Community Councils were local area committees with some devolved decision-making over local funds and agendas largely led by ward councillors. We also explored the role of neighbourhood planning as a tool for local power.

Throughout our research, we have explored the challenges for local institutions. Strengthening participation and community relationships has been a key theme. Interviewees have reflected that local governance can sometimes replicate the 'hierarchies' of power experienced elsewhere in the political system. Where agendas are predominately 'council-led', this can stifle the participatory and deliberative potential of local democratic forums.

We have also heard from Big Local areas and neighbourhood forums that establishing the power balance between councillors and community leadership in community governance can be challenging, involving renegotiating partnerships and forging a new understanding of community power.[viii]

Our Localism Commission concluded that there is no 'one size fits all' for local governance. Instead we developed a set of principles that neighbourhood governance, whether community-led or democratically elected, should follow. We have been testing these principles throughout this project.

–
People are the end goal of localism

Local governance is not an end in itself. While the structures and institutions are important, it is the potential for localism to improve peoples' lives and strengthen communities that matters most. From an ageing population, to the climate emergency - creating the environment for localism to thrive matters because communities hold the expertise and power to address this country's most complex problems. The role of governance at all layers is to unlock this power, collaborate with communities in identifying the problems, and provide the means and resources for communities to lead the solutions.

–
Equality in local participation

For local institutions, this means addressing barriers to participation where engagement is weakest. It requires designing engagement and events together with people and groups that have expertise, networks and relationships in communities that are under-represented.

For example, Par Bay Big Local recognised that the voice of young people is often not heard in their community. In partnership with Kernow Youth, they developed a young advisors programme and a participatory research project to find out more about young peoples' aspirations for the area. The young advisors also helped to design the local neighbourhood plan.

Another example is Leigh Neighbours who have sought to ensure that community projects bring the whole community

together. They have funded youth groups such as Rafiki (working with young refugees) and Kamosi (working with Roma migrants) and worked together on projects such as the Big Lunch.

Dynamic local accountability

Where public engagement in local institutions is limited only to transactional interactions, such as voting, consultations or public meetings this limits the health of local democracy. Embedding participatory democracy locally can strengthen peoples' sense of ownership, increase engagement[x] and enhance local accountability.

In Stevenage, for example, a £40k participatory budgeting (PB) programme is being trialled for neighbourhood improvement projects, with residents shaping ideas and determining priorities for spending. From Par Bay Big Local in Cornwall, we also heard about a PB exercise which had strengthened understanding between residents and mobilised community assets to address key concerns. This evidence is borne out by the wider research which shows that PB can mean that citizens are willing to pay more taxes. It can also strengthen policy outcomes by mobilising a broader range of expertise and experience.[ix]

Community organisations and community businesses also play a key role in strengthening local accountability and voice. Power to Change's research with community businesses has highlighted the blend of mechanisms required, including formal structures, such as board membership, community relationships and networks, and communication and engagement tools.[x]

Our research explored how local institutions can strengthen community relationships and create more dynamic local accountability. This includes:

• Settings and spaces that will broaden community attendance and meeting times and online opportunities that are accessible.

• Disrupting 'hierarchical' formats which perpetuate a 'council-led' power dynamic. Consider how communities and residents can take greater ownership of setting agendas.

• Using participatory methods, such as participatory budgeting. There is a wealth of available expertise on participatory methods and how to establish forums of deliberative decision-making.[xi]

• Partnerships with community organisations with expertise in community development and community organising.[xii]

Local leadership is built around place

Local leadership is an essential ingredient for localism. Community initiatives often rely on a band of resilient and tenacious volunteers. Without their commitment, leadership and expertise, projects might otherwise have failed. In parish and town councils too, passionate and dedicated leaders and volunteers are a driving force behind local democracy.

However, we heard about the challenges of relying exclusively on these local leaders. Volunteers can burnout and ideas can stagnate. Community activity often relies on members of the community that have the skills, and more crucially, the time, to give – and often these are older and retired people. Refreshing community leadership and developing new talent and engagement of young people is essential for community sustainability. Where

partisan politics or entrenched interests dominate forums of local democracy, new voices and experiences are vital to the representativeness and inclusivity of local institutions.

–
Meaningful community powers, backed up by resources

Whether transferring assets and services or delegating decision making, this must include the necessary power and economic levers at a local level. This requires:

- Mapping assets and institutional capacity: to understand where there is capacity for local ownership and service delivery and to build organisational capabilities in 'cold spot' areas.

- A support programme for localism: whether taking on a local asset, running a community service, or taking responsibilities for local strategies, access to support from the principal authority is essential. This support should be provided directly, as well as through the facilitation and strengthening of peer-networks and infrastructure organisations.

Big Local and resident-led governance

The Big Local programme gives 150 areas £1.1m with no strings attached. A partnership is established to manage the fund and spending is completely resident-led to ensure money responds to local priorities, in turn building capacity and leadership within the community. Our project has worked with and learned from residents and members of Leigh Neighbours (Wigan borough), Par Bay Big Local (Cornwall) and South Bermondsey Big Local (Southwark). Case studies of their role in building local power can be found in our area reports online at locality.org. uk/power-partnerships

07. Capacity for localism

For localism to thrive, there must be the capacity within communities to drive forward local initiatives. 'People power' is an extraordinary resource. But it can sometimes be lying latent in communities and requires a catalyst to unlock it. Throughout our research, we heard about the essential role of organisational capacity – including networks, local groups and community organisations – in strengthening community power.

Localism can require nurturing community confidence within neighbourhoods, to grow experience of collective influence. Sometimes this requires reversing what some interviewees describe as the 'paternalistic' behaviours of public agencies and local institutions. Other community interviewees highlighted long-term apathy and a sense of hopelessness within communities which can be very entrenched. A former Big Local Chair recalls one resident's comment during their initial community engagement on how to spend the investment: "Better to use the million pounds to flatten the place and start again".

We heard how community activities, events and small examples of local action can have a 'snowballing' effect within the local community. From community clean-ups and gardening, to annual carnivals and neighbourhood celebrations, the power of local events and initiatives is the visible demonstration of what's possible when communities come together. Relationships, connectivity and sense of pride and belonging created through such action are a key source of local power.

Building long term capacity in communities also requires strengthening local organisations and the civic infrastructure which sustains localism. This includes, for example, community networks that strengthen organising capacity between local groups and activists, such as the Southwark Planning Network. Or community organisations that act as incubators for other community enterprises, such as Abram Ward Community Cooperative in Wigan or Par Bay Big Local in Cornwall.

Community organisations, rooted in the local area, are a key part of the localism ecosystem, supporting civic participation through volunteering, community organising and spaces and networks that bring people together. They can also have a powerful economic role, using assets and enterprise to drive regeneration and create economic opportunities, a role which is particularly powerful in more deprived areas. Community businesses in turn can strengthen social capital and cooperation through their activities, as well as pave the way for other new forms of local community ventures.

For example, Abram Ward Community Cooperative's standout initiative 'Made in Wigan' is providing opportunities for local social entrepreneurs in the borough to start-up community business ideas. They recently opened a shop in Wigan town centre. Abram Ward Community Cooperative originally received funding from the council through the Community Investment Fund to develop their plans. They are now the incubator hub for Power to Change's Empowering Places Fund[xiii], strengthening local enterprise across the borough.

–
Invest directly in supporting community infrastructure

Building the long-term capacity for localism requires nurturing local organisations and social infrastructure. Strategic support can be through direct grants, access to capital investment, community asset transfer (CAT), commissioning, and supporting community businesses in the local economy.

For example, Wigan Council have taken an 'invest to save' approach through their Community Investment Fund, which has

put £10million into VCSE organisations and community initiatives in the borough. Alongside the funding, additional support is provided through the Wigan Borough Community Partnership and council's Deal for Communities Team.

Support community ownership and local assets

The importance of community spaces was highlighted across our project areas. Community ownership can drive aspiration, enterprise, and transform local services. Having the places and spaces where communities come together is also a vital resource for building local capacity and participation. Local authorities can strengthen community ownership and local assets by:

- Having a community asset transfer (CAT) policy that is strategically adopted across the council and a cabinet lead for community assets.

- Supporting sustainable asset transfer by providing long-term leases (at least 25 years so that other funding can be leveraged).

- Providing capital grants and low-interest loans.

- Providing officer support for business planning.

- Working in partnership with support organisations to provide advice and capacity building.

- Enabling 'meanwhile use' by community groups in vacant and underused spaces.

- Regularly mapping the availability of community assets and spaces across neighbourhoods and working in partnership with VCSE organisations and local businesses to address 'cold spots' and lack of provision.

Use commissioning as a lever for building local capacity

Commissioning can play a key role in building community capacity. Unlocking the resources for prevention within public services, requires strengthening the capacity and resilience of communities and neighbourhood services.

As Locality's Keep it Local campaign has highlighted, this includes supporting the development of a network of innovative and sustainable local providers, who have the capacity to deliver high-quality services. Taking a 'local by default' approach to commissioning is a key part of localism. Moving away from large contracting processes and using proportionate funding (including grants) will enable more community delivery. More information is available in practical guides for councillors and commissioners from the Keep it Local campaign.[xiv]

Involving communities and local organisations throughout the commissioning cycle, including in co-design, is also an essential part of strengthening local capacity. Transferring power and resources to residents to shape local services can strengthen community cohesion and local social capital. The NLGN have outlined this powerfully in their case for community commissioning.[xv]

Flexible funding for community projects and enabling social action

Investment in small local projects, whether made available from local government or charitable funders, is essential. Such funds can create the networks and building blocks for further community action and have a snowballing effect in the local community.

For example, Cornwall's 'Community Chest' fund provides each councillor with £2k to allocate to community projects and is a key part of supporting and celebrating local action. In Southwark a small democracy fund and neighbourhoods fund is provided to cover costs of local organising, neighbourhood projects and community meetings. The council have also supported Community Southwark's delivery of Community Action Networks across the borough. These are forums for providing smaller, grassroots organisations with the space, time and support to take action and have influence.

08. The role of national government

Our action research has been focused primarily on the role of local government. This is where the big opportunities to create a new 'power partnership' approach lie. But this approach to localism can only go so far without a more supportive national framework. For a radical new localism agenda to thrive we also need action from national government.

–
Take the Localism Act further

The Localism Act 2011 was a landmark piece of legislation and an important milestone for community power. However, in order to build on its successes there are a number of important amendments required to strengthen the legislation. This includes:

- A review of powers that could be held at a local level. Strengthening the role of neighbourhood forums to take on new powers in non-parished areas. This should include new powers to shape local services and local economic plans.

- Creating a genuine 'Community Right to Buy'. This would give communities first refusal on assets of community value and a longer moratorium on sale to prepare a bid to purchase local assets.

- A reinvigorated localism agenda must be accompanied by a renewed commitment to an ambitious devolution framework for local authorities.

–
Unlocking funding for communities

The £2bn dormant assets funding identified by the Dormant Assets Commission[xvi] is a major source of potentially transformative funding which should be used to invest in our most deprived communities. This should be used to unlock long-term capacity and capitalise our communities through investment in our social and civic infrastructure.

The Community Wealth Fund Alliance is calling for the next wave of dormant assets to be released to create a multi-billion pound Community Wealth Fund. The Community Wealth Fund would provide long term investment in so called "left behind" areas. Local people would be in control to ensure it reflects their aspirations and appropriate support would be provided to communities to build confidence and capacity.[xvii]

–
Embedding community power in new post-EU funding models

The UK Shared Prosperity Fund and the recently announced Towns Fund are major opportunities to invest directly in communities and increase community control in how the money is spent.

Locality's Communities in Charge campaign, in coalition with Co-operatives UK, the Plunkett Foundation and Power to Change, is calling for communities to have a greater role in post-Brexit economic regeneration funding. This should include direct funding for local people to choose and invest in their priorities for their local economy. It should also include a role for local people to scrutinise all spending decisions through an increase in accountability, including through citizen panels.

09. References

i   Locality. 2018. 'People Power: findings of the Commission on the Future of Localism'. Available at: https://locality.org.uk/power-partnerships

ii   Wills, J. 2019. 'A new geography of local government: the changing role of Town and Parish Councils in the UK.' Available at: https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/bitstream/handle/10871/37848/A%20 new%20geography%20of%20local%20government%20in%20Cornwall.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y

iii   Co-operative Councils definition: https://www.councils.coop/about-us/our-values-and-principles/

iv   More information on Stevenage's Enabling Social Action pilots: https://www.councils.coop/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Enabling-Social-Action-Stevenage.pdf

v   DCMS. 2018. 'Civil Society Strategy.' Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-society-strategy-building-a-future-that-works-for-everyone

vi   MHCLG. 2019. 'By deeds and their results: strengthening our communities and nation.' Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/by-deeds-and-their-results-strengthening-our-communities-and-nation

vii   NPI and APSE. 2019. 'Hollowed out: the impact of financial localisation on neighbourhood services.' Available at: https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/index.cfm/research/current-research-programme/hollowed-out-the-impact-of-financial-localisation-on-neighbourhood-services/

viii   NLGN and Local Trust. 2018. 'Rebalancing the power.' Available at: https://localtrust.org.uk/insights/research/rebalancing-the-power-4/

ix   DCMS. 2019. 'Innovation in Democracy'. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/762360/Innovation_in_Democracy_Programme_-_workshop_evidence_pack.pdf

x   Power to Change. 2017. 'Community accountability in community businesses.' Available at: https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Reseach-Report-10-Digital.pdf

xi   See for example, resources from Involve: https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/methods/participatory-budgeting or the Local Government Association https://www.local.gov.uk/topics/devolution/engaging-citizens-devolution/approaches-civic-and-democratic-engagement-0

xii   NALC and Community Organiser partnership, more information available at: https://www.corganisers.org.uk/news-blog/partnership-nalc/

xiii   More information on Power to Change's Empowering Places programme available at: https://www.powertochange.org.uk/get-support/programmes/empowering-places/

xiv   More information on Locality's Keep it Local campaign and resources available at: https://locality.org.uk/policy-campaigns/keep-it-local/keep-it-local-resources/#Research

xv   NLGN. 2019. 'Community Commissioning: shaping public services through people power.' Available at: http://www.nlgn.org.uk/public/2019/community-commissioning-shifting-to-prevention-through-people-power/

xvi   More information available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dormant-assets-commission-final-report-to-government

xvii   More information available at: https://localtrust.org.uk/policy/community-wealth-fund-alliance/

Find out more about our localism research:

Read more about our work in all four areas in our online case studies of Cornwall, Southwark, Stevenage and Wigan at locality.org.uk/power-partnerships

Further resources and support for communities:

My Community   mycommunity.org.uk
Neighbourhood Planning   neighbourhoodplanning.org
Keep it in the Community   keepitinthecommunity.org

Unlock the power in your community with us

Locality supports local community organisations to be strong and successful. Our national network of over 700 members helps more than 400,000 people every week. We offer specialist advice, peer learning and campaign with members for a fairer society. Together we unlock the power of community.

locality.org.uk

🐦 **@localitynews**

📘 **/localityUK**

About Power to Change

Power to Change is an independent trust that strengthens community businesses across England. We received our endowment from the National Lottery Community Fund in 2015. At a time when many parts of the UK face cuts, neglect and social problems, we are helping local people come together to take control, and make sure their local areas survive and stay vibrant.

No one understands a community better than the people who live there. In some areas, people are already coming together to solve problems for themselves, and we support them as they run businesses which help their whole community and recycles money back into the local area. Community businesses revive local assets, protect the services people rely on, and address local needs.

powertochange.org.uk

🐦 **@peoplesbiz**

About Local Trust

Local Trust was established in 2012 to deliver Big Local, a unique programme that puts residents across the country in control of decisions about their own lives and neighbourhoods. Funded by a £200m endowment from the National Lottery Community Fund - the largest ever single commitment of lottery funds – Big Local provides in excess of £1m of long-term funding over 10-15 years to each of 150 local communities, many of which face major social and economic challenges but have missed out on statutory and lottery funding in the past.

localtrust.org.uk

🐦 **@LocalTrust**

locality the power of community