Place Based Social Action

Evaluation Report

The National Lottery Community Fund & Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

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Executive summary

The Place Based Social Action (PBSA) programme represents an investment of £4.5m from The National Lottery Community Fund and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) from 2017–2025. It supported nine local partnerships (following early-stage investment in twenty areas) to use social action to address issues that matter to their communities.

PBSA approaches in places

Partnerships adopted relational, hyperlocal methods: listening deeply to communities, building trust, and supporting residents to lead activities. Initiatives included community gardens, festivals, youth clubs, and advocacy campaigns. Partnerships also focused on building relationships with a wide variety of partners from different sectors to establish more effective multi-agency working practices, that better responded to community need. These approaches boosted social cohesion, resident agency, and local pride.

Context of place-based working

PBSA operated through a period of national upheaval, marked by austerity, Brexit, Covid-19, rising social activism, and a shifting funding and public service landscape. These dynamics increased pressure on communities but also drove innovation, deepened cross-sector collaboration, and reinforced the importance of locally rooted, flexible, and responsive programming.

Evaluation findings

The most significant impact of the funding lay in the time and flexibility it afforded partnerships, allowing them to listen and deeply understand issues, embed and establish themselves locally and develop relational approaches. With this freedom, partnerships were able to build responsive, place-specific infrastructure and act as conveners and facilitators across local systems. These conditions supported partnerships to enable meaningful systemic and community-level change, including:

- **Local systems change**: Partnerships catalysed more cohesive, collaborative ecosystems where organisations shared resources, aligned around resident needs, and developed durable cross-sector relationships.
- **Public sector engagement**: Partnerships influenced service design, embedding resident voice in public sector practice. In some cases, new models of delivery, like GP-hosted dementia cafés, are now owned and sustained by statutory bodies.
- **Perceptions of place**: Enhanced public spaces, events, and resident-led improvements shifted attitudes, increasing local pride and engagement.
- **Resident empowerment**: People gained skills, confidence, and understanding of how to drive change. Activities improved mental wellbeing, reduced isolation, and spurred further volunteering and advocacy.

Introduction

The PBSA programme

Programme overview

The Place Based Social Action (PBSA) programme was launched in 2017 by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and The National Lottery Community Fund. It represents £4.5m of investment over seven years, up until March 2025, it aimed to support ten[1] local partnerships to use social action to address issues and priorities that matter to people in their community.

The PBSA programme used the following definition of social action:

> *"People coming together to help improve their lives and solve the problems that are important in their communities. It involves people giving their time and other resources for the common good. This can be in a range of forms, from volunteering and community owned services to simple neighbourly acts."*[2]

The programme's aim was to build infrastructure around social action, by strengthening the capacity of the voluntary community sector (VCS) in each funded place, through cultivating local cross sector partnerships, supporting relationship building, taking the time to listen to communities' needs and working with local people to develop holistic programmes of activities to respond to identified priorities.

This report and accompanying ethnographic video

This report presents an overview of the programme and draws on the key impacts and learnings from Phase 3. It focuses on the changes to local systems that have been enabled by PBSA, and is complimented by our ethnographic video which reports on the impact for individuals, and brings the programme to life. The report has been authored by Renaisi, and the video ethnography has been produced by our partner CloseUp Research. More information about the methodology can be found in Annex 1.

Phase 3 marks the conclusion of the programme, and as such, these outputs focus on the impact observed at its end. However, it is important to recognise that much of the change detailed in this report would not have been possible without the

[1] By the end of the programme this was nine local partnerships as in 2022, the partnership in East Marsh, Grimsby were no longer able to continue with the programme

[2] 'Place Based Social Action: A Learning Review' was published in July 2018 as part of the Programme, and contains a more detailed explanation of some of the challenges around defining place based social action

groundwork laid during Phases 1 and 2. These earlier phases were crucial in establishing the foundations for place-based working, gaining a deep understanding of community needs, fostering strong and active relationships with local partners, and building the confidence and capacity of local people.

Phase 1 and Phase 2 reports provide greater detail on the programme set-up and mid-phases, there are also a series of short reports illustrating the community-based response to Covid.

Introduction to the partnerships

In Phase 1, the programme funded twenty areas to build local capability and capacity, and to develop a locally informed social action plan. All twenty areas were then invited to apply for Phase 2, but only the ten 'most promising'[3] were selected to receive grant funding to implement their plans.

Initially, it was intended that Phase 3 would involve a further reduction, from ten areas to five. However, feedback collected during and after the transition from Phase 1 to Phase 2 indicated that this competitive approach was creating unhelpful pressure. In response, funders and participating areas collaboratively decided to cancel the planned reduction. Instead, all ten areas would continue into Phase 3, each receiving half of the originally proposed funding amount, redistributing the funds equally rather than concentrating them in fewer places. In the end it was nine of the ten partnerships that progressed.

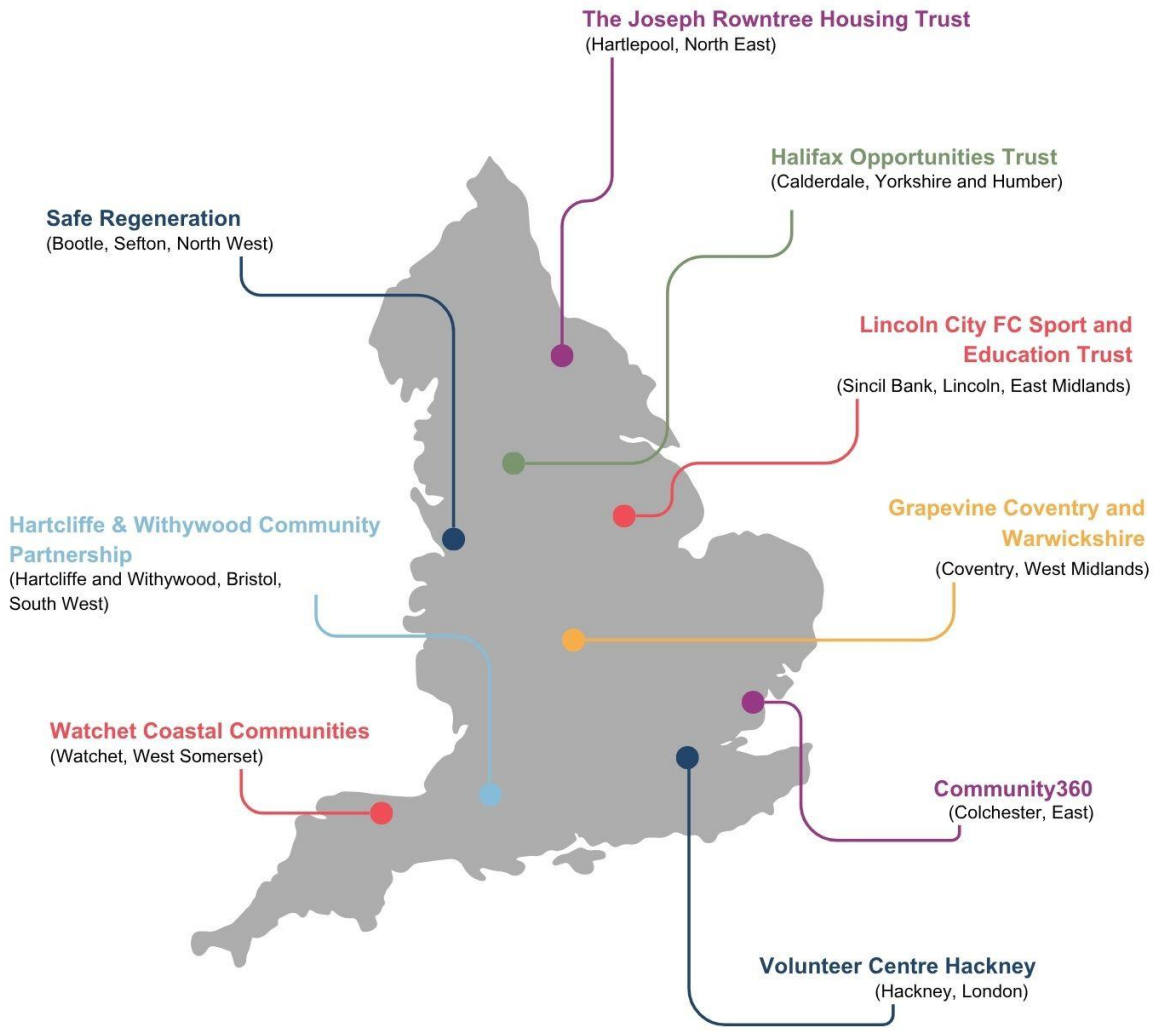
In many ways the approach the partners took to this funding decision illustrates the programme's collaborative ethos from an early stage. It also demonstrates the voluntary sector's desire for continued funding (even at half the amount), in preference to going through a lengthy and competitive processes without guarantee that there will be anything at the other end.

The nine partnerships that went through to phase 3 were made up of a broad range of actors. The lead organisation in each area was required to be a registered charity, community benefit society, community interest company or social enterprise. Other members of the partnership include the local authority, local community members, representatives of voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations. The areas and the lead partner in each area are listed below.

The partnerships that operated at a hyperlocal level tended to serve their whole community, whereas those that operated across entire local authority areas tended to focus on specific issues. For example, the partnership in Colchester focused on being a Dementia friendly borough.

3 Taken from the offer letter to places that went to the initial twenty areas, from the National Lottery Community Fund

The partnerships funded in phase 3



The funding and support provided by the programme

Funding of up to £365,000 per place was allocated to the lead organisation to be spent over seven years.[4] There were few parameters on the funds. It was largely spent on paying for staff salaries providing a dedicated resource for outreach, volunteer management and developing strategic relationships across the place; it was also used to support the growth of smaller organisations, build the capacity of individuals to run social action activities and pay for equipment and materials.

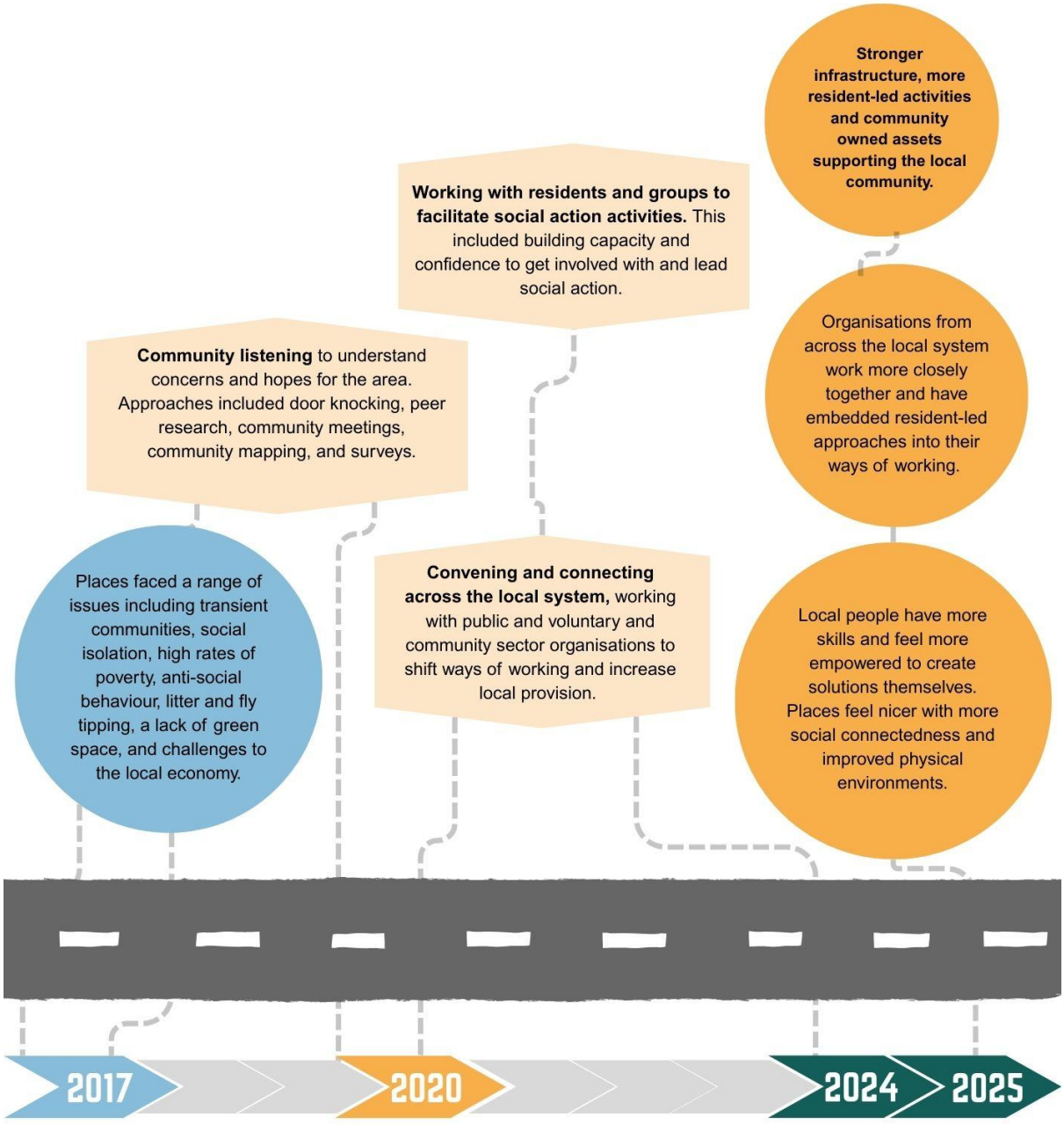
The programme also provided wrap around support, this included:[5]

- **A dedicated learning partner** in each place (Renaisi) - supporting partnerships to build skills in evaluation, such as co-designing theories of change, developing tools to capture insights and embedding learning.
- **A dedicated support partner** in each place (Locality, New Economics Foundation and Co-operatives UK[6]) – supporting partnerships to build social action capacity by playing the role of critical friend, supporter and facilitator. Helping them to strengthen relationships, develop and deliver plans, prioritise activities and access additional funding.
- **A peer learning network** (Locality and Renaisi) - facilitating regular cross place learning events. Providing a space for collective celebration, problem solving and cross-fertilisation of ideas. These were largely held online with a face-to-face event at the end of each phase.
- **A developmental learning and evaluation partner** (Renaisi) – capturing data on an ongoing basis to draw out the conditions and enablers for change, to feed back into delivery; as well as to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the programme.

The PBSA journey

The approach to PBSA was purposefully different in each of the ten places, to suit the local context. However, there are some common factors in each place's process towards change, the journey mapped out below aims to provide a high-level picture of how change came about.

[4] £5K in the first phase (2018), £240K in the second phase (2019 – 2021), £140K in the final phase (2022 – 2025)
[5] The learning partner and evaluator Renaisi, were contracted for all three phases. The Support partner Locality et al, were contracted for the first two phases. Locality also ran the learning network for the first year of phase 3.
[6] Moving to just Locality for one year in 2022


Stronger infrastructure, more resident-led activities and community owned assets supporting the local community.
Working with residents and groups to facilitate social action activities. This included building capacity and confidence to get involved with and lead social action.
Organisations from across the local system work more closely together and have embedded resident-led approaches into their ways of working.
Community listening to understand concerns and hopes for the area. Approaches included door knocking, peer research, community meetings, community mapping, and surveys.
Places faced a range of issues including transient communities, social isolation, high rates of poverty, anti-social behaviour, litter and fly tipping, a lack of green space, and challenges to the local economy.
Convening and connecting across the local system, working with public and voluntary and community sector organisations to shift ways of working and increase local provision.
Local people have more skills and feel more empowered to create solutions themselves. Places feel nicer with more social connectedness and improved physical environments.
2017
2020
2024
2025

PBSA approaches in places

Ways of working

The PBSA partnerships have adopted a range of approaches to meet the ambitions of the programme. These broadly include:

- **Building trust with residents** by taking time to understand each area's history, perceptions, dynamics, and existing assets. Partnerships have used relational approaches, often working with or employing local people who bring deep, lived knowledge and strong connections across the community, voluntary, and public sectors.
- **Developing place-based approaches** through facilitation and coordination across sectors. This often involved close collaboration with local authorities, NHS trusts, and voluntary and community sector (VCS) groups.
- **Being a conduit between the VCS and the public sector,** by building strong relationships with the public sector, illustrating the reliability and reach of the VCS into communities and championing the needs of the community in professional spaces.
- **Engaging in community listening** via proactive, intentional outreach. Methods included door knocking, community meetings, pop-up listening spaces, and events designed to gather residents' voices and perspectives.
- **Supporting resident-led activities** by co-developing activities based on insights from listening and trust-building efforts. Support included securing venues, offering training, mentoring through the setup phase, and providing funding for materials. Activities ranged from community gardens to chess clubs.
- **Strengthening the voluntary sector** by helping informal volunteer groups become formally constituted organisations. Partnerships provided support with governance, financial processes, and building a track record to access further funding.
- **Enabling advocacy and campaigning** by helping residents unite around local issues. This included bringing people together, gathering evidence, and supporting them to engage effectively with decision-makers.
- **Hosting events** as key moments to foster connection, showcase community initiatives, attract tourism, improve place reputation, and encourage wider resident engagement.
- **Promoting community ownership of assets,** in a small number of areas, where partnerships supported the purchase of land for uses like community leisure facilities or housing.

Place by place approach summaries

Each partnership delivered the programme holistically to respond to the needs of their communities, a summary of each approach is outlined below.

Partnership	Summary of delivery
Community 360 **(Colchester, East)**	The Colchester partnership aimed to support residents with dementia through a referral and support pathway to create a "dementia friendly borough". Social action activities delivered in Phase 3 have focused on **creating meaningful support and engagement opportunities for people living with dementia.** Central to this work has been listening to individuals' experiences and reflecting on their needs, which has shaped a range of community-based activities, including **dementia cafés, organised day trips to a therapy farm and circus skills workshops**. In addition, the dementia team has been running **cognitive groups** that create social connections, boost confidence and enhance quality of life. Community360 have leveraged their network to deliver many of these activities **– building capacity and connecting organisations to work together around dementia**. A key success has been the **dementia café, established through a partnership of three local GPs with the support of Community 360.** Awareness raising has also been a priority, with **efforts to promote dementia-friendly values** and understanding among local organisations and the wider community.
Grapevine Coventry **(Coventry, West Midlands)**	The Coventry partnership has used **community organising** approaches to listen to the needs of the community and inspire local people to create their own solutions. To understand the community's needs and identify shared concerns, door knocking, 121s and community meetings were delivered. Training was offered in community organising, helping residents understand how to build relationships and take collective action. There was also a focus on working with communities to build power and recognise local people as a force to drive change. Through facilitated activities such as

	power analysis, **residents identified local leverage points to influence decision-making.** A key success has been a **campaign on road safety,** which has led to the local authority changing road markings and speed limits near a local school. While partnerships with local organisations have faced challenges – especially due to staff turnover and closures – some such as the local library, have been consistent and supportive allies.
Halifax Opportunities Trust **(Calderdale, Yorkshire and Humber)**	The Halifax partnership used **community organising** approaches to understand local concerns, connect people with shared interests, and support people to set up social initiatives. There has been a particular focus on **regular door knocking**, with community organisers going door to door to connect with residents and listen to their concerns. This has led to a range of social action activities including a **community garden and kitchen project involving refugees and asylum seekers, projects to revive neglected green spaces, and an online storytelling group.** Concerns about litter inspired action, including the **installation of new bins and bi-monthly clean-ups** led by local Mosques. **Youth-focused initiatives** were also central, including football, a bowling club, arts, open mic nights, gardening, and boxing, aiming to address antisocial behaviour. These efforts have built collective power within community groups, sparking conversations about further possibilities for local change. There has also been a focus on supporting the community to **hold local services to account, particularly through Ward Forums,** which are now frequently attended and used as a space to raise concerns with the council, police, and others.
Hartcliffe & Withywood Community Partnership **(Bristol, South West)**	The partnership focused on listening and co-creating community led solutions to change. They carried out **informal consultation and listening activities**, such as regular coffee morning which serve as a social space but also provide an opportunity to hear resident views and concerns. The partnership identified **critical needs around isolation in the home and purchased a minibus to deliver a community transport scheme** to enable residents to be more independent and socialise with others in the same position.

	Residents were **also supported to set up and run activities based on their interests,** using the Hartcliffe and Withywood Community Centre as a space for hosting. There was a particular focus on provision for young people, such as a Lego club. The partnership used their position in the system and connection to local organisations to **signpost residents and facilitate conversations** between residents and local services, such as the council.
The Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust **(Hartlepool, North East)**	The partnership aimed to use social action to create a range of solutions to local social and economic challenges. This included carrying out **community-led research 'Voices of Hartlepool'** to identify local challenges, revealing concerns around rising energy costs, access to benefits, leaving care support and food waste, while also highlighting a lack of awareness around how to volunteer effectively. From this, a range of social action activities developed, led by residents, including **organising community events, running a community garden in partnership with a local school, opening a cost-price shop, and delivering a clothes bank providing essentials including school uniforms**. A **community kitchen**, founded by a former prisoner, has brought isolated individuals together to cook and connect. The Action Lab has also worked with local organisations – **across both the public and voluntary and community sector – to facilitate collaboration**. This has included running a monthly 'big drop-in day', where benefits agencies come together to run a drop in for people to access support and advice on their benefits.
Lincoln City FC Sport & Education Trust **(Lincoln, East Midlands)**	The Lincoln partnership sought to increase community cohesion in the area, through delivering activities which enhance communal areas, and generate pride in the area and what people have in common. Social action activities in Phase 3 have focused on **addressing key community concerns** such as litter, antisocial behaviour, lack of green space and welcoming newcomers to the city. A community listening exercise, including surveys and door knocking, shaped the priorities. This resulted in **resident-led events and activities** aimed at creating cultural understanding

	and community cohesion, including pop-up celebrations such as **Trick or Treat trails, Easter egg hunts and conversation classes**. The team also hosted a **'Community World Cup'** featuring 18 teams from 13 nationalities – an idea that emerged from the listening exercise, with football widely seen as a unifying force. **Litter picking** efforts have been especially successful, along with conversations to tackle fly-tipping with the council. A key success has been the establishment of a **Community Land Trust (CLT).** The group has been formed by residents keen to have their say over local assets and increase access to affordable housing. The group now run two green spaces and have recently purchased a residential property to rent out to a local family. Collaboration has been a key strength of the programme in Lincoln, with **strong partnerships formed across local institutions** including the City Council, schools, churches, mosques, NHS and police. These organisations share a commitment to improving the community, and the Foundation has played a vital connecting role in bringing them together.
Watchet Coastal Communities **(Watchet, East Somerset)**	The partnership aimed to address isolation (caused by living in a rural community with an ageing population, amongst other things) by bringing services to people, rather than expecting people to come to services. This included a **community transport project**, with two vehicles offering transport for local people to medical appointments and supermarkets. They also run a mobile library and deliver a **community newsletter 'Watchet Connects'** to every household in Watchet – keeping people abreast of local happenings and promoting activities. In addition to this they work with young people through the provision of an **'alternative' youth club** for those who struggle to engage in mainstream provision. The partnership has also focused on taking a 'facilitation' role, by **supporting residents and groups across the local system to set up activities and strengthen their offer**. This has included: **a women's group for mums; a low-cost lunch club; ESOL and archaeology courses in the local bookshop; biodiversity festival; and a mobile foodbank.**

SAFE Regeneration **(Bootle, Sefton, North West)**	The partnership aimed to bring together local organisations to deliver volunteering and social action activities to help local people contribute to the regeneration of Bootle. They host a great deal of social action activities at their community pub – The Lock and Quay and adjoining Safe Hub – including **litter picks, garden club and canoeing sessions**. They have also held several **resident-led events**, such as a **country music festival, a ukulele festival and a 'River of Light' celebration** involving people with disabilities. These events were developed with financial sustainability in mind, via ticketing and external grants where available. There has also been a focus on **facilitating collaboration**, with organisations now working together to provide support to each other, share resources, and collectively deliver activities. Throughout the programme, Safe Regeneration also worked on the **redevelopment of a local area**, working with the council to secure planning permission for this. They have also worked on a number of **strategic initiatives beyond Bootle,** including with the Church of England to support developments and community land ownership across the UK, and developing a toolkit with the University of Liverpool to capture learning on community asset ownership.
Hackney Volunteer Centre **(Hackney, London)**	The partnership focused on establishing their **community hub model** and building the capacity of residents to run activities themselves. Over Phase 3 their community hub model 'Our Place' expanded from one hub to two. The hubs provide free spaces for the community to take part in training, and the team support residents to develop ideas into **community-led projects**. With guidance and encouragement, this has led to the creation of **arts and crafts clubs for children, adult crochet and sewing groups, football sessions, a breakfast club, and a warm hub offering soup and games**. The **food pantry**, originally set up during Covid, has continued to support families. Accessing additional funding has helped many of these initiatives move towards self-sufficiency. Hackney Volunteer centre have also started running the **Our Place model from local GP surgeries**, focusing on activities

that provide non-medical interventions to support health, such as seated yoga and strength building exercises for women.

Strong **collaboration has underpinned this work,** bringing together a wide range of partners in the borough including housing associations, local GPs, resident groups, schools, mental health services, gardening clubs, and faith organisations.

The context of place-based working

While PBSA has played a key role in driving change in the nine places by providing funding for over the seven years, there have been various external factors that have also influenced change (both positive and negative). This section of the report provides an overview of the social and economic changes over that period, and points at how these have impacted delivery, to help contextualise the findings around impact later in the report.

Austerity

By the time PBSA places were awarded funding in 2018, austerity measures had been in place for eight years, this meant the programme came in to being at a time when there were significant structural, social and financial pressures on voluntary sector organisations and residents. Communities also felt the impact of drastic cuts to youth services and social care, amongst other things.

Brexit

Brexit shaped the early years of PBSA, setting the tone for a period of uncertainty and division. The 2016 referendum and the drawn-out process leading to the UK's eventual withdrawal from the European Union triggered a wide range of reactions across the country. For some, it sparked a renewed interest in politics and civic engagement; for others, it led to a sense of disillusionment and withdrawal. This polarisation, combined with the contentious debate around migration, deepened social divides and, in some cases, fuelled incidents of racism. Additionally, the loss of most EU funding resulted in significant financial shortfalls, particularly in some of the UK's most deprived communities.

Covid

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in March 2020, not only incited fear and pushed many people further into isolation, or into isolation for the first time, but also had a significant negative impact on individuals' mental health. It has been widely

acknowledged that the pandemic led to an increase in poverty across the UK. For example, a report published by the Legatum Institute in November 2020, found there were 690,000 additional people in poverty in the UK as a result of the economic fallout caused by the pandemic, and that the largest impact has been amongst working-age adults.[7] Joseph Rowntree Foundation's annual report in the same year also highlighted the groups that experienced the worst economic and health impacts, including part-time and low-paid workers and Black and minority ethnic households.[8] Those trends were echoed in our research at the time, with PBSA partnerships reporting that one of the most significant shifts was the number of people experiencing poverty for the first time, as the reality of longer periods of unemployment became more apparent.

PBSA partnerships also reported that there was continued scepticism around participating in activities, being in public spaces, and socialising, as people had lost their confidence over repeated lockdowns and social distancing. Partnerships noted that this impacted their ability to engage residents in social action, often making it harder to encourage residents to get involved and requiring intensive outreach and trust building to re-engage communities.

However, the pandemic also contributed to increased community cohesion, with the formation of thousands of mutual aid groups and a surge in social action. This included a rise in volunteering, greater donations to food and clothing banks, and the emergence of informal support networks in hyperlocal areas, providing evidence that people did want to be involved in and support their communities locally.

Additionally, the pandemic spurred stronger collaboration between the public sector and the voluntary and community sector, where VCS organisations became crucial for reaching residents and delivering essential support. These efforts prompted widespread recognition that meaningful systems working was not only achievable but an essential mechanism to supporting the most marginalised.

The cost-of-living crisis

Already high levels of deprivation were compounded by the cost-of-living crisis at the end of 2021, where inflation peaked leading to rising energy costs, increased mortgage rates and rent hikes, particularly affecting low-income households and vulnerable groups.

The financial pressure on organisations led to closures in local areas, affecting social sector ecosystems locally and reducing opportunities for collaboration. Equally, financial pressures led to scarcity mindsets amongst voluntary sector organisations, leading to competition and suspicion, further limiting collaboration.

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[7] Baroness Philippa Stroud, *Poverty During The Covid-19 Crisis*, Legatum Institute, November 2020
[8] https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2020-21

PBSA partnerships reported a growing demand for services and support and a decline in living standards for residents leading to a reduced willingness to participate in social action, as people needed to focus on meeting their basic needs.

Changes to the public sector

In 2018, Northamptonshire County Council issued a section 114 notice, declaring it had insufficient funds to meet its annual forecasts, since then six others have followed (Birmingham, Croydon, Nottingham, Slough, Thurrock, Woking), ongoing financial pressures suggest that more could be expected in coming years.

The NHS have also undergone significant changes, in 2025 announcing the abolishment of NHS England to be absorbed by the Department of Health and Social Care, as well as 50% cuts to running costs at local integrated care boards (ICBs).

It was noted by partnerships that public and statutory organisations, particularly councils, are generally shifting their ways of working to embed community voice and resident-led approaches. The NHS are in the process of embedding Integrated Neighbourhood Teams, to improve health and well-being in local communities by bringing together professionals from various organisations (health, social care, and voluntary sectors) to deliver coordinated, community-based services. Similarly, the government have signalled their own approach to neighbourhood working using resident panels and taking devolved approaches. These shifts signal the public sector's commitment to working collaboratively with the voluntary sector long-term, both to create cost savings, as well as to enhance longer term outcomes for local people.

Changes to the funding landscape

In recent years there has been a dramatic shift in spending from UK charitable trusts and foundations, following huge outlays of funds during Covid in an attempt to sustain the voluntary sector. Many are spending down (Albert Hunt, Lankelly Chase, and Edward Gostling), and there have also been a number of high-profile pauses including Tudor Trust, Children in Need, Peter Harrison Foundation, City Bridge Foundation, and Henry Smith Foundation, to name a few.[9] The result of this is that the funding available in the system is significantly decreased.

Increased social activism

[9] This information comes from 'The List', a public resource developed by Jo J https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1rjf-OU1NzBdOw_rNsDH0KLANpaWHuYtX3KB46qZAkes/edit?gid=0#gid=0

Following the killing of George Floyd, an African-American man who was murdered by a white police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 2020, thousands of people across UK cities joined protests in support of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, driving greater awareness of racial disparities in policing, employment, housing, and healthcare. Since then, there have been increasing numbers of public protests for other causes such as the climate and in support of Ukraine and Palestine, respectively, signalling a shift in the public psyche towards taking action.

What has this meant for PBSA?

PBSA operated through a time of extreme change in the country. In November 2024, The Social Metrics Commission reported that the rate of poverty in the UK is now higher than at any point in the 21st Century.[10] This is not separate from the fact that there is now less money in every part of the social system, leaving people and organisations with fewer resources. These pressures made cross-sector collaboration not only beneficial but necessary for both cost saving and reaching more people. In addition to this the voluntary sector are also working in new ways with each other, with more value being placed on understanding each other's strengths and assets and sharing resources where possible, responding to the need to think creatively about their survival. This has undoubtedly contributed to more effective place-based working in these areas and supported one of PBSA's core outcomes to increase the capacity and ability of organisations and communities *'to work together in different ways – creating new spaces for collaboration and engagement across sectors based on more equal relationships'.*

Concurrently, there has been a noticeable shift in public attitudes toward taking social action at national, global, and community levels. Additionally, as a result of the pandemic's restrictions on movement, and the heightened awareness of hidden vulnerabilities close to home - people have become more engaged and invested in their local communities, supporting the PBSA outcome for: *Local people to feel more empowered, and increasingly able to take action on issues that matter to them.*

It is clear, therefore, that PBSA outcomes were influenced by external factors, which is to be expected in a long-term programme of this nature. However, within this context, the steady, long-term investment provided by PBSA funders created space for partnerships to deepen their place-based approaches, experiment with new ideas, and respond flexibly to emerging needs. The research we conducted during the evaluation shows that PBSA partnerships were better equipped to harness the positive impacts of these external challenges because they had already

[10] MEASURING POVERTY 2024, A report of the Social Metrics Commission

established the infrastructure and relationships needed to adapt and respond effectively.

PBSA has also been able to capitalise on a wider shift towards public social action in day-to-day life and partnerships have used the funding to sustain mechanisms to make this more possible. Examples include: formalising community groups into organisations that can receive grant funding to support more people, embedding community transport schemes in some areas and developing methods for the community to advocate for change through campaigning.

Evaluation findings

The evaluation has taken a realist approach to understanding impact, by exploring with partnerships - what has happened in what context and why, aiming to unpick the key enablers and barriers towards creating and sustaining long-term change in the communities it has operated within. Our primary research has been with staff and volunteers at the organisations involved in delivering the work and focuses on their experiences of the programme.

Throughout the evaluation we have used a dedicated framework to hold our findings, this focused on place and programme level outcomes:

Place level outcomes
• **Local organisations** from different sectors work more collaboratively to create avenues for people to get into social action • More **social action is being enabled** in places • **Local people** feel more empowered, and are increasingly able to take action on issues that matter to them
Programme level outcomes
• Increased understanding of the **impact social action can have** on individuals and communities more broadly • Improved knowledge around the **enabling factors for social action to thrive** 1) for individuals 2) for local systems

By the end of phase 3, we can say with confidence that the programme has achieved the outcomes it set out to.

This report presents the programme-level outcomes, with a focus on the impact of social action on people and communities, as well as the enabling conditions that have allowed social action to flourish. These outcomes have been made possible through the achievement of place-level outcomes across the programme.

In particular, the report highlights how partnerships have contributed to changing local systems. This includes the development of new ways of working with the public sector, the strengthening of the social sector, and improvements in perceptions of place, all of which have had a tangible impact on local communities.

More information about our methodology and the framework we have used for evaluation can be found in Appendix 1.

Changes to local systems

Strengthened social sector ecosystem

Social sector infrastructure has improved

PBSA has seen social sector infrastructure strengthened, with **more resident-led groups being established, strengthened, and formalised**. This has led to more activities owned and led by residents and improved services for residents that are responsive to local need.

Several PBSA partnerships have focused on **building the capacity of local people to run their own social initiatives**. In Bristol, Hartcliffe and Withywood Community Partnership (HWCP) have built a core team of volunteers who ran a range of sessions and activities for the local community. These volunteers have been supported to develop skills and confidence to run their own activities, and now do so independently, activities include a resident run book club and Lego club. Some partnerships have helped groups to become more sustainable by supporting with the development of governance structures and access to funding. In Hackney, The Our Place team have supported residents to set up five new Community Interest Companies (CICs) – including a food pantry and a women's health and wellness group.

The capacity of the lead partner in Watchet greatly increased because of PBSA

At the beginning of the programme the Coastal Communities Team (CCT) was a small volunteer-led group, without any financial track record, meaning they initially delivered in partnership with Onion Collective, who received funding from The National Lottery Community Fund and acted as the accountable body. Through delivering PBSA the CCT has built capacity and now has a paid staff member and the track record to receive funding. As an organisation, they now support other groups to build their capacity, formalise, and access funding.

"[PBSA] helped develop our strategy as an organisation. We're not here just to bring a few extra tourists into the town, which could have been a tourist board to do that. Our Coastal Communities Team is trying to be that focal point for the organisations as to how we can, as a community, go forward together, individually and together, and how can we help facilitate the connections with local leaders. And how can we help you define what the problems are and how together we can solve them. And I think prior to PBSA, we didn't have that." (Watchet partnership)

Infrastructure has also been strengthened through local assets coming into community ownership. In certain places – particularly Lincoln and Bootle – there has been a **focus on community land and asset ownership**. As a result, more local assets and spaces are managed by residents, for the benefit of the wider community.

Developing a Community Land Trust in Lincoln

In Lincoln, a Community Land Trust (CLT) has been established through PBSA. The group aims to bring local assets into community ownership, including housing that can be rented to families at affordable prices. The group has been supported to come together, build their capacity, and take ownership of local assets. The CLT now manage two local green spaces and a residential property and focus on running these spaces in a way that benefits the community. One of the green spaces – a pocket park – was originally owned by the council but closed due to antisocial behaviour. The CLT were able to re-open the park and improve the space, which is now frequently used by the community for a range of activities. The residential property has recently been purchased by the CLT and will be rented out as affordable housing to a local family.

Local organisations are better connected and work together

Several partnerships reported that **PBSA had facilitated a more joined up and cohesive local system**. Across places, social sector organisations are typically working more closely together, drawing on each other's assets and reducing duplication. This has ensured the local system is more cohesive and well-coordinated, as well as organisations supporting each other to strengthen their offer – for example sharing knowledge, skills, and resources. Alongside this, PBSA lead organisations have used their embedded role in place to strengthen their relationships with local organisations, meaning they are more able to signpost and refer residents to support. Ultimately, this has led to an improved local offer for residents, with more quality support available and accessible.

"I think it's given the partners confidence that there's more, that they're part of something bigger…so there's a lot of new groups and boards and collaborations and collectives that have come around from when we first started the Action Lab, from that sort of siloed landscape that was present at the time." (Hartlepool partnership)

Improved capacity and reputation of lead organisations

For several PBSA lead organisations, the long-term funding provided by the programme enabled these organisations to become deeply embedded in their areas and focus consistently on the issues that matter most to local people. This **sustained presence has helped build trust, increased their credibility and raise their profile within the local system**, creating a strong foundation they can continue to build on in the future. For example, in Hartlepool, the Action Lab was new to the town when the programme started. Through delivering PBSA over the past seven years – including building relationships with residents, VCS partners, and statutory organisations – the Action Lab has built a strong profile and reputation and are **now recognised as a key system convenor and facilitator**.

Equally, the long-term investment from PBSA has also **allowed lead organisations to build their capacity**, including thinking more strategically about their approach and developing new ways of working. Some have even become experts in systems facilitation. For example, in Bootle, Safe Regeneration supported local organisations and social businesses build models for community-led housing.

New ways of working amongst public sector organisations

Public sector services have adopted new ways of working

Certain places have been able to **influence local public sector services to adopt new ways of working**, including collaborating more closely with VCS organisations and adopting resident-led approaches. As a result, PBSA places have seen **meaningful shifts in the ways public sector organisations design and deliver services**. Lincoln City Council, for example, reported that the partnership had increased recognition of the importance of resident voice within the council, with learning from PBSA shaping further council work, such as the council's Controlling Migration Fund which was designed and developed in collaboration with local partners and residents. Similarly, the council recently secured further National Lottery Community Fund funding for another neighbourhood in Lincoln, which will draw on learning from PBSA in the delivery approach.

Throughout the PBSA programme, Safe Regeneration in Bootle has been transforming a canal-side area through a range of community-led initiatives, including litter picks, kayaking clubs, a thriving social enterprise hub, and a community pub offering good food and live music. Their ambition is to continue developing the area, and they have applied for planning permission to build affordable housing and business spaces. Although the council initially rejected the proposal, Safe Regeneration worked diligently to rebuild the relationship. This effort led to a pre-planning agreement with Sefton Council, allowing the two parties to co-develop the plans with council input at each stage. Safe Regeneration is now working closely with the council to move the development forward. The council's support of the area has also grown significantly, it has even invested in shipping containers to host live music events, including a performance by Tom Jones.

Both the partnerships in Colchester and Hackney have **embedded models within GP surgeries**. In Hackney, the work has focused on supporting residents to upskill as volunteers and to offer non-medical interventions through GP surgeries, to support residents with their health and wellbeing. So far, this has supported around 600 people. In Colchester, Community 360 has convened a network of three GP surgeries to develop and deliver a regular dementia café, offering a social space for people with dementia. This activity is now run independently by the surgeries.

Shaping statutory provision in Hartlepool

In Hartlepool the Action Lab worked closely with statutory providers to improve collaboration and service provision. This has included **working with the local Department for Work and Pensions team to facilitate more sensitive approaches to working with residents**, including increasing understanding of why residents might present at the service and the barriers they might be facing. This has resulted in a more humane and respectful approach to support residents, that moves away from seeing people as 'problems'. Alongside this, the Action Lab has improved collaboration from the statutory sector. Benefits agencies now attend a 'big drop-in day' – facilitated by the Action Lab once a month – where residents can attend one location and access support to ensure they are claiming the benefits they are entitled to. The Action Lab has also facilitated increased collaboration between the council and VCS organisations, with the council working in a more open and collaborative way.

"Now even the local authority is much more collaborative. I mean, some of that was driven by COVID and the fact that they needed to survive and meet need, but also us just being here and being able to show that this way of working collaboratively and sharing resources is powerful beyond return on investment" (Hartlepool partnership)

Residents are more able to hold public sector providers to account

In certain PBSA places, the programme has also **increased mechanisms for residents to influence public sector providers and hold providers to account.** For example, in Bristol, HWCP have become a key link between the local community and public sector organisations, such as the council, police, and schools. HWCP have strong relationships with residents and facilitate regular listening spaces, such as coffee mornings, to understand key priorities for the community. HWCP use this

knowledge to inform and influence local public sector providers (e.g., taking insights to local strategic meetings), as well as facilitating residents to share their views with providers (e.g., facilitating spaces for schools and parents to come together, to discuss challenges at a local school).

Similarly, in Halifax, residents now frequently use Ward Forums to take concerns to local representatives, including councillors and the police. At the start of PBSA these forums were not well attended, but now consistently have good attendance from residents. For example, a group of women came together to report concerns about a rat problem in the area, which was then addressed by the council. Equally, public sector providers have started taking the forums more seriously, including more providers and senior representatives attending.

Improved perceptions of places have led to positive outcomes for residents, places and partnerships

Perceptions towards place have improved

There have been tangible changes to places, with **improvements in physical space** e.g., reduced litter, more green spaces, and artwork decorating community spaces, and **more activities and events taking place locally** - ultimately giving people more to get involved in, reducing isolation and antisocial behaviour. According to partnerships, this has led to increased satisfaction and positive perceptions towards the local area.

Local people recognise their ability to create change and know how to do this

PBSA partnerships reported changes in perceptions, specifically amongst residents who had been involved in or benefitted from PBSA, with **more residents recognising their ability to create change and understanding routes for action**. At the beginning of the programme, partnerships often encountered apathy amongst residents, who felt resigned to local issues and didn't see the power they had to create change. This was also compounded by the external challenges that impacted self-motivation towards action. Several partnerships also noted challenges with transience and disconnectedness in the community.

In building capacity and enabling social action in communities, more residents now recognise their ability to create change and feel empowered to do so. Being part of social action activities or seeing resident-led change achieved locally has demonstrated what is possible, meaning those who have been involved in social action or who have directly benefited from it, recognise the potential for catalysing change themselves.

Equally, residents who have been involved in social action also understand how to create change. There are better connections, formed through collective action, alongside improved understanding of the practical steps to create change, such as where to access support and funding, and avenues to influence local decision-makers. In Halifax, the partnership put this increased empowerment down to

intensive community organising, where people felt listened to and supported to come up with solutions.

"The impact of all this is people suddenly getting that they are a community, they can see change very quickly if they work together and actually just talk to each other. And then the empowering is quite magical." (Halifax partnership)

Campaigning for road safety in Coventry

In Coventry, a resident-led road safety campaign has transformed both streets and mindsets. Concerned about traffic near a local school, residents came together to campaign for better safety measures. Their efforts included creating a video that was shared with local councillors. The campaign led to concrete results: improved road markings and the introduction of a 20 mph speed limit. Beyond the physical changes, the campaign sparked a powerful shift in perceptions of power. Residents involved in the effort—primarily a group of migrant women—realised that they could drive change and that their voices mattered. Many shared that in their countries of origin, they wouldn't have felt able to speak up, let alone influence local decisions. This experience was both empowering and transformative for those involved.

Enhanced reputation for partnerships leading to new opportunities

Shifts in perceptions also extend beyond residents. The strengthening of the local ecosystem and infrastructure through PBSA, with stronger relationships and collaboration, mechanisms for resident voice, and social action activities taking place, alongside enhanced reputation for partnerships delivering this work, has **created foundations for further funding and investment**. In Hartlepool, for example, project stakeholders suggested that PBSA work laid the foundations for further investment from Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust, through their Emerging Futures programme. By strengthening the local ecosystem through PBSA and developing a local profile for the Action Lab, Hartlepool was considered a good place to implement the experimental systems change programme.

In Halifax, the PBSA approach has led to further funding to continue resident-led ways of working. Public Health have provided funding to North Halifax Partnership for a community organiser function. Further, the area was recently awarded UK Shared Prosperity Funding – community organisers from Halifax Opportunities Trust were asked to advise on the delivery of this funding to ensure the approach was truly resident-led. Both examples demonstrate how the enhanced profile of resident-led approaches and the PBSA partnership have led to further opportunities in the local area.

Other places have been able to draw on their enhanced reputation and profile to share learning beyond their place. In Bootle, for example, Safe Regeneration have developed a reputation in facilitating community asset ownership. This has led to them working to support this process with different groups and organisations across Liverpool and the North West, alongside working with the Church of England to support their work around community asset ownership. Safe Regeneration are also working with the University of Liverpool to develop a toolkit on community asset ownership to support others through this journey.

The impact of change to the system on local people

The changes we have seen to places and systems have led to **tangible outcomes for residents and communities, for example, those involved in social action reported feeling a greater sense of purpose and meaning**. They became more connected to their local area and experienced pride in participating in something that made a positive difference. In Hartlepool, one social action activity has focused on working with men who have recently left prison, offering peer support and practical assistance, which led participants to get involved in further social action like renovating a local community centre.

> *"That kind of pride in place has definitely been increased for the people directly involved. I think it does have an effect on those around them. You couldn't quantify it, but I think in terms of just how people are operating, in terms of what they're doing, there is that purpose to what's going on." (Hartlepool partnership)*

Participating in social action or attending activities also led to **increased social connection and reduced loneliness**. People were able to expand their network, connect with others, and get involved in activities. In many cases strong bonds and friendships were formed as a result. Participating in something and spending time in others was also associated with improvements in mental health and wellbeing. In Watchet, the partnership reported working with a man who had lost his wife during Covid and had become isolated. He started volunteering at the bookshop, mainly sorting books as he didn't feel confident engaging with customers or sitting on the till. Over time, volunteering built his confidence, and he took on a greater role in the bookshop. The partnership reported that this had served as a way to reconnect him with the community and reduce his isolation.

Residents were able to **develop their capacity and skills** through volunteering or running their own activities. This contributed to **improved confidence and self-belief for individuals**. **Many residents were also able to develop specific skills and knowledge**, such as applying for funding or running events. In some cases, partnerships noted the skills and confidence developed had helped individuals find their way into employment. In Bootle, the PBSA lead supported a number of residents to set up CICs such as Halle's Hub which raises funds for youth provision, through selling affordable essentials.

Getting people involved in social action led to a **reduction in antisocial behaviour** in some places, particularly amongst young people. With more activities to get involved in and a greater sense of ownership of their surroundings. In Halifax, for example, antisocial behaviour was affecting a local bowling club. To address this the PBSA lead hosted a summer social action programme, getting young people involved in looking after the space, including litter picking and gardening. This increased their investment in the space and reduced antisocial behaviour.

Many social action activities centred around improving the physical environment, including renovating green spaces and reducing litter. This resulted in tangible **improvements in the physical environment**, with community spaces residents can enjoy. In both Lincoln and Bootle, for example, the partnerships focused on litter picks and commissioning artists to paint murals. In Lincoln, the partnership noted that this led to a reduction in litter and fly tipping.

What factors have contributed to change?

How did PBSA funding and support contribute to change?

Core funding for a paid staff member

Across places, PBSA funding has primarily covered the costs of an employee.[11] Whilst each role has looked slightly different, this individual has typically been responsible for building relationships across the system and enabling social action. **Funding for this role has given organisations the capacity to catalyse and enable much of the change** laid out in this report.

Many of the roles funded by PBSA have focused on **relationship building with residents, typically through active outreach, listening and long-term trust building**, as well as catalysing social action, through support and **capacity building activities like coaching and practical advice** (e.g., in funding processes, governance structures etc). This support is typically more intensive early in a social action journey and then reduces once a resident or group has more confidence and capacity.

People in these roles also act as **system navigators and connectors** – linking into things happening across the system to support, influence, and refer. This has included supporting residents to advocate for change and facilitating discussions between local partners. In Hackney, for example, the Community Engagement Care Coordinator has drawn on their knowledge of the local system to connect residents to additional support – either to facilitate their social action activities (e.g., connecting to Hackney VCS so residents can learn how to incorporate a business) or to support with their additional needs (e.g., financial support, foodbanks etc). Similarly, in Colchester, C360's Engagement Officer convened a network of organisations to raise awareness of dementia, supporting organisations to adapt their approaches, and connect organisations who could share best practice and work together. Local stakeholders noted the value of their knowledge of the local system and ability to signpost and connect.

Crucially, these roles have not been focused on direct delivery or outputs, meaning lead organisations have had the capacity to work flexibly across the local system and enable others to create change.

[11] Whilst in earlier phases, additional funding was available for supporting social action activities and community events, the funding package was reduced for Phase 3, meaning most of the funding has covered staff time in each partnership, with small amounts earmarked for resources for social action activities

Key characteristics of PBSA leads

- Commitment to the PBSA ethos, including a willingness to listen and be led by residents.
- Deep understanding of the local area and personal connection to the neighbourhood.
- Empathetic, personable and approachable. This includes the ability to build friendly and informal relationships across the local system.
- Enthusiasm and passion for the work, which can build buy-in and confidence locally.
- Patience and perseverance, especially as building social action capacity takes time and commitment.
- Knowledge of the local system and services available.
- Able to facilitate, mediate, and translate across different groups of stakeholders.

Flexible, long-term funding

Throughout PBSA, **places weren't expected to meet set deliverables or outputs. Instead, there was a broad focus on core values and approaches, such as being resident-led and collaborative**. This allowed PBSA partnerships to respond to local needs and priorities, including adapting and shifting approaches when required. Partnerships recognised the value of this funding approach as it has allowed them to work with no set agenda. Instead, they have been able to use the time to embed themselves, understand and link to local priorities to generate buy-in and ownership, and support local organisations, groups, and residents to set the direction.

Partnerships also noted that the flexibility has been important in facilitating a hyper-local approach, which ensures delivery is tailored to the local context, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach dictated by a funder.

"The freedom that's come with PBSA has been gold dust. We've been able to adapt and change with the community, because the funders have allowed us to do that, and not many funders do that." (Hackney partnership)

"PBSA funding has given us freedom and time to build relationships, all the best things we are doing have come about by having time to dedicate to them." (Hackney partnership)

Partnerships also cited the **importance of the length of PBSA funding**. Each of the nine partnerships have been funded by PBSA for seven years – funding of this length was considered rare by VCS organisations. Ultimately, this length of funding

has given PBSA partnerships time to develop relationships and trust and build more sustainable social action capacity, rather than just delivering activities.

Longer-term funding also built in **time for learning, adapting, and navigating challenges**. It has been possible for partnerships to trial new things and be led by the community, with longer-term funding offering the space for this kind of approach.

> *" It's yet another argument that you can't give people 12, 18 months [of funding] because if you lose a member of staff or you get a member of staff who has a personality clash with someone they need to work with, you can manage that output only to an extent. Community work needs time for challenge. But then also because it can be a drip feed, it can be a slow burn." (Halifax partnership)*

Partnership funding model

Over the programme, we have seen partnership working play out in different ways across places. **At the beginning of the programme, there was an expectation for all members of the partnership to work as equal decision makers. However, as the programme has progressed, the model has shifted towards being led by a lead partner, who has worked closely with others across the system.**

There have been cases where the core partnership continued to work together throughout the programme, most notably in Lincoln, where the Lincoln City Foundation and Lincoln Council who had a relationship before PBSA, worked closely together until the end of the programme. The partnership suggested this was because they had a shared focus and set of priorities from the outset (e.g., the council's focus on the Sincil Bank area, alongside PBSA funding which was also targeted to the area), as well as having continuity of staff involved who have good working relationships with each other.

In other cases, the role of the core partnership was intentionally phased out or collaborative decision making was limited. In these places, the **lead organisations typically took on the role as local funder, capacity builder, systems convenor and facilitator**, linking in with a range of partners locally, depending on needs and priorities. In some instances, this shift was caused by a breakdown in relationships due to personality clashes between key individuals. However, in most cases, this tended to happen naturally over time, largely because most partnerships decided to spend the PBSA funding on a member of staff that was hosted at the lead organisation. The lead partner model also worked more efficiently than involving everyone in every decision, and other organisations that had been involved as core partners reported being happy with the set up.

As such, it appears that **funding a core partnership does not necessarily lead to stronger collaboration**. Instead, more effective collaboration has been achieved by investing in a key local organisation that can serve as a knowledge hub, convener, and facilitator. An organisation that has the capacity to understand the local context, assess how different parts of the system are functioning, and strategically connect

and activate those elements to drive change. Crucially, that also has the time and resources to build relationships and networks across the local system, laying the groundwork for sustained, collaborative action.

The support provided to share learning

The PBSA partnerships embodied a strong commitment to learning and adapting, both locally and across the PBSA programme as a whole. In earlier phases of the programme, a survey revealed that partnerships valued the support provided by the learning and support partners (Renaisi and Locality respectively), with many highlighting the **value of having a critical friend to develop ideas with**. As well as the **benefit of having facilitated sessions in their places to focus on visioning, theory of change development, and developing monitoring and evaluation frameworks**, allowing them to collectively think more strategically about their offer, and develop mechanisms for understanding its effectiveness.

Partnerships have also **valued the cross-place learning networks and relationships that have formed through the programme**, to support cross fertilisation of ideas. Forging alliances with other organisations in other places has also given individuals a wide pool of knowledge and experience to draw on.

However, in recognition of the wealth of knowledge accumulated that could benefit the wider sector, the partnership in Bootle highlighted that **more funding was needed to share learning**. Although they have voluntarily supported places like Preston and North Wales in adopting the "Bootle model" and have developed a toolkit with the University of Liverpool, they are frequently approached for advice on setting up Community Land Trusts, and their capacity to continue doing so in a relational and holistic way, is limited without dedicated resources.

How did partnerships' ways of working contribute to change?

Locally rooted organisations and staff

Typically, both lead organisations and staff have a long-term connection to place. Several PBSA organisations had worked in the local area for several years prior to PBSA, meaning they had an understanding of the local context, a reputation locally, and existing relationships. These were all valuable assets that PBSA could build upon.

Many of the staff working on PBSA also have a strong connection to the local area, having either grown up there or lived and worked there for several years. Partnerships reported that this offered valuable contextual knowledge, connections and relationships, and an ability to build trust with residents. However, there were also risks associated with this. One partnership noted that if things go wrong or don't

work out, it can put staff in a difficult position because they are part of the community.

"I'm from the town. That's probably why JRF is accepted to the town. It's because people see JRF as me, and I'm from Hartlepool, you know, born and bred, never moved out of Hartlepool." (Hartlepool partnership)

Outreach and listening

PBSA partnerships have used **outreach and listening approaches** to reach residents, understand their priorities, and encourage them to get involved in social action. This has often been an intentional and considered approach that goes to where people are, to reach as many people as possible, including those who might be more disengaged. For example, in Watchet the team has set up a stand at monthly street fairs to speak to people, in Halifax community organisers conduct regular door knocking, and in Coventry listening stations were set up on busy streets. Other places have taken a more informal approach to listening, by running activities that also serve as a space for people to share their views. For example, in Bristol a range of activities run from HWCP also serve as a space to gather people's views, such as regular coffee mornings.

"One of the things that we found has been quite effective is that sometimes you have to go out to where the people are, rather than expecting the people coming to you. If you just say, there's an open meeting here, people don't come. But if you say, let's go to the Phoenix club and talk to the clients there about what they want or we go to the people in the foodbank..." (Watchet partnership)

Across partnerships the **importance of starting with listening and consultation** was emphasised. This ethos was considered essential to ensuring local provision and activities genuinely serve the local community. Partnerships also noted the need for this to happen regularly and consistently to ensure residents have frequent opportunities to share their views – meaning this becomes normalised for local people and it's possible to keep up to date on local priorities.

Partnerships did report some challenges in outreach and listening. Many of the PBSA places have experienced general over-consultation of which PBSA has in some instances added to, with residents regularly consulted on their views but seeing little change as a result. This could lead to scepticism amongst residents when being asked to share their views.

Resident-led

Across places there has been an emphasis on resident-led ways of working, with activities and projects shaped around the specific priorities of individuals and communities. In some cases, this has involved work with individuals to develop

activities around their interests, such as a Lego club or parchment craft group. In other cases, groups of residents have been supported to work together to address an issue that matters locally, such as road safety or litter. Crucially, partnerships have focused on understanding local priorities and then supporting residents to lead action around this.

"There's no restrictions. They've kind of allowed us to have the space with our own expressions and the way that we like to do things." (Hackney volunteer)

Partnerships noted the importance of tailoring their approach to each resident, recognising the importance of going at the pace of individuals, rather than being one size fits all.

A resident-led approach has not always come naturally for communities. **Many partnerships encountered expectations that they would deliver what residents were requesting, rather than residents being willing to get involved themselves**. Whilst in some cases this was driven by this being a new way of working that communities weren't familiar with, partnerships also encountered circumstances where the causes were more complex. For example, a resident may not have the time or headspace to lead on social action, particularly if they were working or had other pressures in their life. This could also limit the extent to which people were able to commit consistently, meaning they had to drop in and out of activities.

"Because volunteering and running a program is low on your priority list when you've got loads of other stuff going on in your life that you need to deal with first, and housing and money and health are more important priorities than volunteering and sharing your skills." (Hackney partnership)

Partnerships also reported encountering a sense of apathy locally, where communities were cynical about the possibility for change or their ability to be part of the solution. More specifically, there could be a perception that only large organisations hold the power to create change.

"Oh, well, we can't do anything because central government or the unitary authority, they've got their money, and they've cut this service, they're closing the library or whatever else." (Watchet partnership)

Whilst this can be challenging to address, partnerships reported approaches that had helped with this. Demonstrating tangible change to a local area can shift mindsets on what is possible – especially when this has been catalysed and led by residents. In Halifax, through community organising and listening activities they identified that potholes were a substantive issue for local people and developed a campaign to tackle it. This led to much wider engagement in ward forums. In Lincoln the process of setting up a CLT was long and sometimes frustrating for those involved. Whilst it took several years for the group to purchase a property, in the meantime they were

able to take on a pocket park. This was considered an important quick win that kept up momentum and buy-in.

Equally, taking an asset led approach and understanding the different types of power the community holds can help residents understand where they can make a difference.

"Obviously, there was a lot of things that people are experiencing that we weren't able to address because we just didn't have the infrastructure there. And rather than try and, like, slog and create that, we just wanted to try and, you know, go where the energy was and use the assets that we had."
(Hartlepool partnership)

Capacity building

The importance of capacity building has been emphasised consistently throughout this report. This has included informal coaching and advice, allowing residents to feel more confident in their ability to lead something and more practical support and capacity building related to the technicalities of running a group or activity.

"And I think that's one thing that this project's been able to hone is finding those people and community members and building their confidence. Watching them go from an idea, to developing something, to practicing it, and becoming quite autonomous"
(Hackney partnership)

However, Partnerships also noted some of the challenges in building capacity to run activities and groups. **PBSA leads often take on a large and diverse range of projects, meaning they must 'wear lots of hats' and must learn about different things**. This can stretch their capacity and risk burnout. For more substantial projects, such as establishing groups or taking on assets, there is also significant complexity and bureaucracy involved, as well as financial barriers, which can be challenging for both staff and residents to navigate. Partnerships have addressed this by drawing on the expertise and support of partners (e.g., referring residents to specific training or support), as well as the different skills or experience residents can offer. For example, the Lincoln CLT is made up of residents with different professional backgrounds and lived experience, who all bring different skills to the group and have helped to navigate some the complexity and challenges.

Collaboration

Whilst more collaborative systems have been an outcome of PBSA, collaborative ways of working have also been a key enabler, particularly in facilitating resident-led social action. Collaborative approaches have included:

- Working with local organisations to create a more joined up system for residents. This has included signposting residents to services that can support

capacity building for social action or meet broader needs (e.g., financial advice, housing etc).
- Working with other locally rooted organisations to understand local need and priorities.
- Sharing information and resources, to reduce duplication across the system.
- Connecting groups and organisations to each other, so they can work together around a social issue.

Crucially, PBSA leads have been intentional in their approach to collaboration. This has included building relationships based on their area of focus or local need, mapping organisations in the local area to understand the landscape, and understanding power in the system and targeting organisations who can influence change.

Partnerships noted there had been some challenges in building collaborative relationships, including generating buy-in and sustaining commitment over time. This has been particularly challenging in a broader context of pressure on the social sector and the closure of organisations.

Aligning to wider initiatives in the place

PBSA partnerships are not the only social initiatives or organisations operating in their area. Equally, the collaborative and facilitation approach taken through PBSA means other organisations and resources have contributed to enabling change locally.

"I do think in every story we're telling about the success, other partners have been really involved. We haven't done all of that." (Halifax partnership)

In several cases, PSBA partnerships have drawn in other organisations and resources to maximise their impact. In Lincoln, alongside PBSA the council has focused significant resources on the Sincil Bank neighbourhood. This has included an action plan and set of recommendations for the area, which has helped to focus attention and resources. The partnership noted that this had contributed to changes in the neighbourhood, as well as bringing additional funding into the area, including for housing and regeneration. In Bootle, other funding is often drawn in to facilitate different activities. For example, resource from PBSA and Groundswell was combined to run a Canal of Lights festival. In Halifax, North Halifax partnership fund one community organiser role through PBSA funding and another through funding from public health. Both staff members carry out similar work and contribute to local change.

Conclusion

Over seven years, PBSA has supported the development of more connected, resilient, and empowered communities by investing in local infrastructure, relationships, and capacity. Communities are now better equipped to self-organise, hold decision-makers to account, and continue driving change through established mechanisms.

At the heart of PBSA's success is the long-term, flexible funding awarded to places. The programme has demonstrated that when local people are given time, trust, and support, they can transform their communities from within. As the programme draws to a close, its legacy is visible not only in the outcomes achieved throughout the programme, but through the impact these have led to outlined in this report - improved places, stronger networks, and empowered people. There is also something notable about the ethos the programme has championed: one that centres community voice, values collaboration over competition, and recognises that meaningful, lasting change takes both time and deep-rooted commitment.

Relationships have been the cornerstone of this success. Building trust among residents, organisations, and public sector partners was essential to the programme's impact. PBSA allowed the time needed to do this well. As a result, mechanisms for change have become embedded in day-to-day practices across sectors and communities.

Questions remain regarding how sustainable these impacts will be now PBSA has ended. There is certainly evidence that new ways of working are set up and running sustainably – like the community transport schemes in Bristol and Watchet which are now supported by the local authorities, a Community Land Trust in Lincoln which has been set-up to continue to bring assets into community ownership, numerous groups and networks now running autonomously, such as a dementia friendly café run by GPs in Colchester. There is no question that the relationships developed will also remain and hopefully grow. However, several partnerships acknowledged the significant challenge of sustaining momentum without continued funding and staffing.

This challenge extends beyond PBSA and reflects deeper systemic issues within the wider funding landscape. Many voluntary sector organisations are structurally and legally reliant on grant funding, yet are increasingly expected by funders to 'diversify income streams' or focus on 'innovation', even when their work is responding to urgent, ongoing community needs. It is also important to acknowledge the role that funders play when withdrawing support at the end of a grant term, and the responsibility they share in planning for sustainability. While it is understandable that grants cannot be sustained indefinitely, the reality of limited funding across the sector creates a persistent tension between the need for long-term stability and funder expectations - one that many PBSA partnerships are still working to navigate.

In addition to this, this evaluation revealed a vital need to fund capacity within the sector to share learning and support others to build on what works. Without this, there's a risk of repeating mistakes and losing valuable knowledge gained through years of place-based work. Investment in specific roles that can provide one-to-one support and targeted resource-sharing for VCS groups across the country could be critical to supporting long-term change across communities.

Learning and recommendations

These learning and recommendations have been established from the research findings, as well as co-designed with people from the PBSA partnerships. These have been set out for the voluntary and community sector, for local funders and commissioners, and for national funders and policy makers.

For the voluntary and community sector

1. **There is value in working collaboratively across a local system.** This creates opportunities to collectively advocate and influence funders and decision-makers, which can be more powerful than individual organisations doing this alone.
2. **Sharing resources** (e.g., spaces, knowledge, assets) reduces duplication, enhances provision, and maximises impact. It is particularly valuable when organisations work together to share skills and build each other's capacity, leading to improved provision.
3. **Carving out capacity and resource for a dedicated role** that can convene and connect across a system enables more collaborative working. This individual can hold responsibility for building relationships, understand provision across the system, and connecting organisations who could work together.

For local funders and commissioners

1. **Embedding mechanisms to understand the local context** – including lived experience and resident voice – in decision-making, design, and delivery of services ensures communities feel ownership over local provision and needs are better met. Where possible, using participation and co-production (e.g., participatory grant making) can shift power to communities.
2. **Maintaining a focus on place and place-based working** ensures approaches are tailored to the local context and brings in key stakeholders. In particular, having teams or officers who are rooted in places and neighbourhoods helps to facilitate this.
3. **Equitable and two-way relationships** with the VCS can facilitate local change and increase access to residents. They have unique expertise, skills and connections locally, which can support local funders and decision-makers to meet their goals.

For national funders and policy makers

1. **Long-term funding is essential** to create lasting change in places. PBSA has given places time to build relationships with residents, VCS partners and the public sector, develop local capacity, build reputations, create structures

for sustainability, encourage experimentation, and adapt to changing contexts and priorities.

2. **Providing core funding,** particularly for staff roles, is essential for facilitating change in a place or system. These roles play a key role in relationship building, convening, and capacity building. Whilst they may not deliver discrete projects or outputs, their role maximises impact by working with others.
3. **The people leading PBSA have been central to its success**. These staff members have had to 'wear many hats', balancing strong relational skills with the ability to navigate complexity, bureaucracy, and legal frameworks (such as community asset ownership or setting up CICs). Having the right people in these roles and ensuring they are properly supported and fairly compensated has been essential to delivering such a complex and multifaceted programme.
4. **Flexible funding** allows local organisations to tailor their approach to their context and follow local priorities. The flexibility and open agenda has ensured buy-in is generated and residents have a sense of ownership. In particular, working to an ethos rather than set outputs ensures funded organisations can meet programme expectations whilst still tailoring to the local context. This is supported through monitoring approaches that are light touch, relational, and based on capturing learning and challenges.
5. **The programme's mandate to work in partnership worked well**, **but lead partners have been critical to success.** The partnership model enhanced existing relationships and meant that cross sector partnerships were stronger and able to mobilise more quickly at critical points, such as in response to the pandemic. However, the original partnership model - where multiple organisations had equal decision-making power - faded over time, and we saw the emergence of the lead partner model. Suggesting that a more effective model would be to support lead partners to lead, by building the capacity and skills of staff and supporting them to focus on relationship building.
6. **Improving access to funding for smaller or volunteer led groups** helps to strengthen social sector infrastructure. This could include reducing requirements or limitations on smaller funding pots or creating mechanisms for smaller organisations to build their capacity and track record in partnership with a more established organisation.
7. **Additional support and peer learning opportunities** offered through programme funding support funded organisations to build their capacity, access advice and guidance, and learn from others delivering similar work. There is significant value add in funding this type of support within a programme.
8. This evaluation underscores the **urgent need to invest in the sector's capacity** – not only to share the learning and resources developed through this work, but also to enable others to build on what's already been shown to work, avoiding the repetition of past mistakes. This could involve identifying

key individuals and providing them with funding to share their knowledge and offer step-by-step support to others.

Appendix 1 – Methodology

This report presents findings from Phase 3 of the PBSA programme, from February 2022 to March 2025. It aims to summarise some of the key findings from this period, provide a picture of change at the end of the programme and identify enablers and barriers to creating this change.

This report has been informed by:

- Conversations with partnerships during one-to-support
- In-depth qualitative interviews conducted once a year
- An analysis of monitoring reports submitted to The National Lottery Community Fund
- Video ethnography carried out by our partner CloseUp Research with people in places
- Notes captured from the final PBSA celebration event where we facilitated a number of sessions to gather feedback from PBSA partnerships on our findings, their perception of sustainability and co-creating recommendations for others doing this type of work in future.

We have collected data, not just about impact in places, but also on the processes of creating change, by exploring the specific approaches or operating conditions that have contributed towards change.

Researchers used detailed notes and an observation and learning log to track relevant findings to develop a comprehensive understanding of the development and impact of the programme.

Limitations

Given the complex context in which the programme operates, there are two notable challenges to providing a fully comprehensive evaluation.

As Place-Based Social Action is fundamentally a capacity-building programme for local partnerships to build infrastructure, our primary research has inevitably been with staff and volunteers at the organisations involved. Although community members have benefited greatly from the programme's impact, and some of this is captured in this report and by the video ethnography, they are distant from the funding and operation of the programme. For example, it is unlikely that most individuals that took part in activities would know what PBSA was and how it related to the activities they had taken part in. Therefore, the perspectives are largely from people who have direct knowledge of the programme and how the funding has been used.

A further limitation is confidently attributing outcomes solely to PBSA, when there are such a variety of factors to consider in areas of high deprivation with complex

voluntary sector landscapes, facing multiple interconnected challenges that were exacerbated by austerity, Brexit, Covid, the cost-of-living crisis, increased social activism, changes to the public sector and so on. However, through our role as an embedded evaluator and learning partner, and through all of the qualitative research we have conducted over five years with people in places, there is enough evidence to show that PBSA has played a significant enabling role in delivering the outcomes we have described in the report.

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