



# How to develop, deliver and sustain community-led change

A practical guide for voluntary and community organisations, and funders, drawing on key learning from the Place-based Social Action programme (PBSA)

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# About this guide

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 up to 10 local partnerships to use social action to address issues that matter to their communities.

This guide sets out key principles for developing, delivering and sustaining community-led change. These insights are especially relevant for others working in complex local systems, leading collaborative programmes or aiming to embed resident voice in decision-making.




**For voluntary and  
community organisations**

# 1 – Develop

Building strong foundations is essential. The early phase of your work should focus on understanding the local context, building relationships and creating the conditions for collaboration and resident leadership.

## Focus on relationships and listening first

The impact of relational approaches is cumulative. Attempts to shortcut the process or parachute in solutions without first building relationships can be less effective.



***“Relational work takes time, but it builds the trust needed for lasting impact.”***

## What this means in practice

- Prioritise trust-building with residents, partners and public sector bodies.
- Start by being visible, consistent and responsive. Use regular, accessible methods to gather resident views: door knocking, coffee mornings, listening events. Close the feedback loop – show people how their voices shape decisions.
- Make listening a habit, not a one-off exercise.
- Work at the pace of the community, don't rush towards impact, outputs or change.



# Hire the right people


The people leading this work are its biggest asset. Their skills, relationships and resilience are central to making things happen and sustaining momentum. It's critical to recruit people who can wear many hats, including:

- Willingness to listen and be led by residents.
- A 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.
- Strong leadership, able to facilitate, mediate, and translate across different groups of stakeholders.



## Build cross-sector partnerships early

Bringing community groups, councils, health partners and others together around the same goal as early as possible can lead to much more strategic longer-term partnerships, as well as providing a compelling and strategic offer for funders to invest in.



***“Being part of something bigger gave partners confidence... now there are new collectives and collaborations across the town.”***

## What this means in practice

- Mobilise around a local issue that matters to local communities, as well as local politicians and commissioners – such as road safety, physical environment, loneliness and mental health.
- Use the funding as a hook to engage wider partners.
- Demonstrate the effectiveness of shared ownership and benefits for all involved, through strong evaluation.

## 2 - Deliver

Change sticks when people feel ownership over it.  
PBSA showed that resident-led action, when supported properly, can continue long after funding ends.



## Enable, don't just deliver

Delivery is when you are likely to see the most impact, for this reason it can be tempting to get on with it yourselves. However, in order to be truly resident-led and collaborative, the trick is not rushing it, instead finding the right people and opportunities, providing support and focusing on activities that really matter to communities.

***"The most powerful legacy was resident-led groups that kept going after the programme."***

## What this means in practice

- Go to where people are, don't expect them to come to you. Find people who don't usually engage by choosing places where you think they hang out and speak to them.

*"If you just say, there's an open meeting, people don't come. But if you go to where people already are, they will talk."*

- Focus on creating the conditions for others to act – understand interests, support people to grow in skills and confidence, offer mentoring and coaching, and connect people to training and resources, as well as others in the area doing similar things.
- Offer practical help with things like funding for activities, hosting activities, supporting people and groups to understand which governance models might work well for them and support them to formalise.
- Act as the spokesperson for the community, use your position to help them advocate for important change.
- Do pursue small wins – early success builds confidence and momentum.

# Embrace a learning culture

Change isn't linear. You need space to try, adapt and sometimes fail. A learning mindset makes your organisation, and your community, more resilient.

It is worth noting that having the time and space to test and learn can be challenging if it isn't properly funded.

## What this means in practice

- Make time for reflection, adaptation and experimentation.
- Test new approaches and treat failure as a chance to learn.
- Join peer learning networks and share insight with others.
- Look for funding that allows you to test ideas and manage risk.

***"All the best things we're doing came from having time to try them."***




# 3 – Sustain

Working to sustain change is just as critical as enabling it in the first place. Embedding sustainability into your processes from the beginning is key to meaningful change that has a lasting impact.



## Work systemically

Lasting change requires planning for sustainability from the beginning, thinking beyond project timelines and plan to embed your work in people, systems and structures.



***“We didn’t do all of it.  
But we created the  
space and  
connections that  
made it happen.”***

## What this means in practice

- Strengthen your organisation’s role and credibility. Position yourself as a trusted, strategic actor in the local system, with strong links and reach into the community. Develop partnerships that extend your influence and reach.
- Play the role of convenor and connector. Bring people together to think and act differently. Highlight each other’s strengths and support others to understand where there might be opportunities for collaboration.
- Look for opportunities to embed new ways of working and influence how services are delivered. This could be through co-design with the NHS or council staff or looking for alignment with wider local priorities to stay relevant.
- Build mechanisms that last, such as community transport schemes, land trusts or resident-led forums.

# Plan for the future

It's critical to start planning for the future, before contracts end – to make plans, where possible to retain staff.

## What this means in practice

- Consider how to fund key roles, apply for funding specifically for convenors, coordinators
- Build capacity among residents and groups to take on leadership and delivery.



**For funders**



# 1

## Invest for the long term

**Change in communities takes time. It takes years to build trust, develop relationships, understand local systems and support people to act. Short-term funding often prevents deep, lasting change.**

## What this means in practice

- Provide funding over 5–7 years wherever possible.
- Accept that progress may be slow or uneven in early stages.
- Focus on long-term, systemic outcomes, not short-term deliverables or the impact on individuals taking part. This is important, but it is only one part of the bigger picture.
- Invest in a lead partner and support them to lead by building the capacity and skills of staff and supporting them to focus on relationship building.

# 2

## Create the conditions, don't control the outcomes

Sustainable change is more likely when communities are trusted to lead. Top-down targets can stifle the creativity and ownership needed for long-term impact. PBSA also showed that supporting people to organise, govern and fund their own work helps embed long-term impact.

## What this means in practice

- Offer flexible, adaptive funding that allows for iteration and learning. Focus on the ethos or approach, not fixed outputs.
- Improve access to funding for smaller or volunteer led groups, to help 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.
- Invest in coaching, mentoring and skills development. This could be in supporting staff to understand governance structures and funding models, so that they can help others formalise and access funds.
- Trust local actors to set priorities and decide how best to work.

# 3

## Fund people and relationships, not just projects

Relational roles, those that connect, convene and support, are essential for enabling change but often overlooked in traditional funding models.

## What this means in practice

- Fund core staff roles that enable partnerships to build and sustain relationships. Whilst they may not deliver discrete projects or outputs, their role maximises impact by working with others.
- Staff members doing this work have 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). It is important to have the right people in these roles and ensuring they are properly supported and fairly compensated.
- Allow roles to be flexible, adaptive, and responsive to what emerges.
- Recognise and value relational skills like facilitation and trust-building.



# 4

## Strengthen the local ecosystem

No single organisation or project can deliver lasting change alone. Well-connected, collaborative ecosystems are more resilient and better able to sustain progress. Change is also more likely to last when it is embedded in how public services and institutions work, not just in temporary projects.

## What this means in practice

- Fund 'soft' activities like relationship building, networking, learning and knowledge sharing.
- Fund the infrastructure for collaboration e.g., co-production, conveners, coordination, shared spaces, data sharing, referral processes.
- Where possible put conditions on funding that the work needs to be cross-sector, to ensure buy in from the public sector. However, ensure that those leading distributing or managing the funds are representative of the community, so as not to perpetuate existing power dynamics.
- Bring in case studies or share best practice, for cross-sector partnerships to see where this type of work has worked well elsewhere.

# 5

## Share learning widely and resource it

The learning generated through long-term programmes is valuable to the wider sector. Without dedicated support, this knowledge risks being lost.

## What this means in practice

- Fund organisations to document, package, and share their learning and recognise that dissemination is a core part of sustainability.
- Create opportunities for peer learning and cross-sector exchange.

## Get in touch

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