

How a program giving millions to residents to improve their neighborhoods also risks entrenching inequality

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Over the past quarter-century, the idea has taken hold among politicians across the spectrum that one of the best ways to address inequality is to give local communities the resources to do the work themselves. Provide them with funding, and they can spend it on the projects that their communities really need. But our research has shown that while many of these projects can be very positive, they can also entrench existing inequalities.

The UK's largest community empowerment program, the National Lottery-funded [Big Local](#) is a prime example of this thinking. Launched in 2010, it supports [resident](#)-led partnerships in 150 relatively disadvantaged areas across England. Each receives at least £1 million to improve their neighborhood.

With colleagues from six universities, we've been examining the impact of Big Local on social and health inequalities since 2014. The achievements are impressive, but [our findings](#) reveal something else, too.

Differences in [power](#) between individuals and groups in the communities, as well as with professionals and organizations, meant some residents benefited far more than others. Power differentials also limit the extent to which Big Local can deliver lasting change in social and health inequalities.

Positive impacts

[Our research](#) used data from surveys and public services to assess benefits among the residents involved in the 150 partnerships and the people living in their local areas. Interviews and observations in 15 areas provided more detail on these experiences.

The improvements delivered by these communities are many and varied. They have set up football clubs, built sports facilities, created

[community gardens](#), opened community hubs, increased work-related skills and improved public transport, deepening community cohesion along the way.

One partnership in south-west England employed a chef to provide free meals for children during school holidays. Another, in the north-east, supported an open-door mental health group after it lost its funding. As one resident put it:

"For me, the stuff that Big Local does that has a lot of value is actually more of the quieter stuff."

Our findings concur with the resident who described involvement in Big Local as "uplifting". Until COVID hit in 2020, [mental well-being among residents](#) on Big Local partnerships was improving. Levels of anxiety [in Big Local populations](#) had reduced compared to other areas.

And our [cost-benefit analysis](#) suggests Big Local is good value for money. We put a monetary value on the increase in residents life satisfaction and it was £60 million more than the cost of the program.

Burdensome responsibilities

But it's not all positive. Among residents on Big Local partnerships, those with higher educational qualifications (a measure of higher socio-economic position) [reported](#) improved mental well-being but those with no formal qualifications did not. And, at least initially, men were more likely to report improved mental well-being than women.

[Residents' stories](#) help explain these inequalities. Some spoke about being burnt out from the volume of work. A resident in north-west England said,

"I went through a period about 18 months ago where I was completely frazzled by the whole thing. As the partnerships mature, they take on more responsibility and one of the areas where we took on that responsibility was employing people. Yet as a partnership board we had no legal constitution; we had no procedures to speak of."

Difficult relationships also contributed. As a resident in north-west England explained:

"The negative was when the board was divided. Just grinding me down. It was just like the same thing over and over; the same argument, and it was draining."

Residents were very committed but combining Big Local and family responsibilities was too much for this interviewee in Yorkshire:

"The gala I found very stressful this year because it were down to me to organize it all. Then you just think, all this hassle; you've got your mum and dad who are getting older and poorly. Two sisters who are disabled. So, your family comes first. That's why what I said is 'I'll step back.'"

When community power isn't enough

While [Conservative](#) and [Labour](#) politicians support the idea of community power, giving communities responsibility for improving conditions in their neighborhoods takes a heavy toll.

If agencies work alongside communities as equals, invest long term and use resources flexibly it could reduce the burden. But the way power is distributed and exercised also needs to change.

[The £1 million](#) changed power dynamics in communities. Residents said just having money in their back pocket gave them more influence with

local agencies.

Big Local also built other forms of [community power](#). People felt confident in their ability to act together and started to understand how to build and sustain alliances within their community and with external agencies. They collected skills and knowledge to create conditions conducive to change.

But these powers were unequally distributed. Surviving poverty and discrimination is hard work at the best of times so the more people were focusing on that, the less they were able to get involved in Big Local. This, combined with gendered inequalities in power, contributed to the unequal distribution of benefits.

The power wielded by organizations such as [local councils](#) could also constrain Big Local communities. For example, some resident-led partnerships were expected to navigate complex legal processes, such as buying and managing community assets (like land or buildings) with little or no expertise or professional support.

Those involved in community initiatives need to [map how power dynamics](#) affect community action, how they create inequalities in the benefits of involvement and how they need to change.

But however good they are, community empowerment initiatives like Big Local can only ever be one part of the solution to social and health inequalities. The main drivers of social and health inequalities lie outside the control of communities living in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods.

For example, from 2010, as Big Local was launched, [austerity](#) began to decimate public services, hitting disadvantaged areas [hardest](#). Also from 2010, tighter eligibility rules and reduced [welfare benefits](#) further

impoverished some residents and negatively affected their [mental health](#). Significant as they are, Big Local's achievements could not compensate for what was lost as a result of these cuts.

[Research](#) shows that communities are uniquely able to identify and prioritize problems that need solving. But that does not mean they should be left to solve them. So-called "community power" will become a form of DIY welfare if communities are expected to carry all the responsibility.

The result would be to further disadvantage those already bearing the heaviest burden and leave inequalities untouched. Community power can contribute to action for greater equity but only if disadvantaged communities use their power to build alliances beyond their neighborhoods, locally, nationally and internationally to achieve transformational change.

In response to the issues raised in this article, Local Trust chief executive Matt Leach said, "Trusting local people to make key decisions about how to improve their neighborhoods has to be at the heart of plans to address deprivation and regenerate communities that have missed out. For over a decade Local Trust has demonstrated how this can work in practice, working to support residents of 150 neighborhoods across the country in the biggest ever Lottery-funded investment in community-led change.

"Many of the biggest disparities in outcome and opportunity are most profound at a neighborhood level. This report, ten years into the Big Local program, shows just how much can be achieved by putting local people in the lead, providing a strong evidence base that government and other funders can draw on when seeking to address disadvantage and deprivation, rebuild social infrastructure and transform our most left behind neighborhoods."

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