New seeds beneath the snow: Big Local neighbourhoods in action

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"Big Local taps into a long history... That raises two questions. The first is how to make change stick, when so many initiatives of the past have come unstuck. The second is how to connect local change, often at a very small scale, with the wider changes required to end the perpetual cycle of renewal and decline in which the benefits, ultimately, appear to flow out of localities rather than into them."

Across England, 150 communities are using £1 million each to make their area a better place to live. They are part of Big Local, a resident-led programme of local transformation, described as 'perhaps the most important and ambitious experiment in community development ever undertaken in the UK'.

Julian Dobson reports on the aspirations and achievements of Big Local areas in Merseyside, Lincoln and Telford, and places them in the context of previous experiences of community development, decline and revitalisation. Providing comparison, he also reflects on the work of three other projects: the Peckham Health Centre, established more than 90 years ago, the Deighton and Brackenhall Initiative in Huddersfield, and Manor and Castle Development Trust in Sheffield.

This essay is one of a series exploring how people and places are changing through Big Local. Each essay considers the lessons of Big Local for institutions and policymakers interested in radical devolution of power and responsibility to a community level.

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Julian Dobson

About the author

Julian is a writer, researcher and commentator on place, society and social policy. He is the author of How to Save Our Town Centres (Policy Press, 2015) and was co-founder and editorial director of New Start, the magazine for UK regeneration practitioners. He previously edited Inside Housing, the national magazine for housing professionals, and has recently completed a PhD at the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University.

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Cover, P4 and P18: Volunteers at the community garden in Netherton - L30 Big Local. Photos: Andy Aitchison. P8: The community fridge at Brookside Central, Telford, run by Brookside Big Local. Photo: Andy Aitchison. P28: Justine, local mother and volunteer, at the new play area in Diamond Park, funded by Birchwood Big Local. Photo: Andy Aitchison. P38: Peckham Pioneer Health Centre, 1950. Photo: George Konig/Keystone Features/Getty Images. P46: Deighton Carnival 2017. Photo: Huddersfield Examiner/MEN Media. P54: The Quadrant, Sheffield. Photo: Garnett Netherwood Architects.

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FOREWORD

Big Local is a programme with huge ambition and a radical mission. Between 2010 and 2012, the Big Lottery Fund identified 150 areas that had 'missed out' on lottery and other funding in the past. These were often areas with significant levels of social and economic deprivation, which lacked the civic infrastructure needed to organise support for the sorts of community action other areas might have benefited from.

Each of those areas was allocated £1m of Big Local funding to spend over ten to fifteen years in any way they chose, provided local residents could organise themselves locally to plan and manage that funding, and bring the community together to make decisions on where the money should be spent.

Beyond that, rules, constraints and priorities were for local people to decide. This was probably the first big investment—in what has become a growing wave of interest—in place-based funding. And it was a massive test of whether transferring resources and control to local people could add value beyond the increasingly recognised limits of conventional grant funding.

The activities and initiatives Big Local areas have chosen to take forward have included everything from setting up community-based training and employment schemes to tackling antisocial behaviour; from building affordable homes

to creating new community facilities, parks and sports centres, and providing more activities for young people; and from responding to local health and environmental issues to addressing community cohesion. Most importantly, through their initiatives Big Local areas have also started to build the skills, partnerships and confidence needed to equip their communities for the future.

Five years into the Big Local programme, Local Trust has invited a range of writers, thinkers and researchers to reflect on what has been achieved, in a number of essays to be published during 2017 and 2018. David Boyle kicked things off last year with The Grammar of Change, which highlights the potential released by the Big Local approach, and the real challenges faced by local communities as they seek to adapt and respond to tougher circumstances and rapidly changing times.

In this second essay in the series, writer and thinker Julian Dobson places Big Local in the context of past, area-based regeneration programmes, and speculates about the extent to which the hope and enthusiasm being generated by Big Local will be capable of responding to the challenges of austerity and wider social and economic changes threatening many of our communities.

Matt Leach
Chief executive
Local Trust

CHAPTER ONE

Waiting for germination

A SOCIETY THAT LOOKS AFTER ITSELF, without help or interference from the state, might sound like a Utopian fantasy. But, one might argue, such a society already exists below the radar in the form of the self-organised and mutually affirming activities of ordinary people when they take power into their own hands, from distributing food to building their own homes.

The housing activist Colin Ward talked of such a mutually supportive society as ever-present, like the seed beneath the snow, waiting for the right conditions to allow it to emerge and flourish. This is the ideal of countless community projects; it's also an ideal advocated from radically different political perspectives. It can be a tempting philosophy to adopt when public finances are stressed.

But what if the snow never lets the seed germinate? What if, in the famous phrase of C. S. Lewis in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, it is always winter and never Christmas? Can neighbourhoods and communities emerge from the grip of austerity and from decades of deprivation by devising their own futures?

Across England, 150 Big Local projects are starting to offer some responses - if not solutions - to this conundrum. New

seeds are being discovered under the snow, and some long-dormant ones are beginning to germinate.

The theory of Big Local, in a way, is that there is no theory: provide the seedcorn funding (£1m for each neighbourhood over ten years) and a basic infrastructure of facilitation and networking through Big Local reps and 'locally trusted organisations' that offer support and expertise. The rest is up to local residents. You want to put on a firework display? Go ahead. You want to set up a community garden? There's nothing to stop you.

This is a far cry from the targets and accountability structures of previous regeneration programmes. But it's not strictly true to say there is no theory. There is a long history and philosophy of self-help and mutual aid that Big Local draws on, even if it's not explicit and scarcely gets mentioned. Many of the ideas being tested in Big Local areas have been tried before, with different degrees of success and longevity.

This essay seeks to explore and better understand how Big Local fits within that history and philosophy. It reflects on that context, not just as an intellectual exercise, but to understand how Big Local might develop; to ask what we can realistically expect of these 150 community-based projects; and to consider what the Big Local neighbourhoods will need in future in order to preserve and build on their achievements so far.

To uncover some of the aspirations and achievements of Big Local I visited three projects between August and October 2017: L30's Million in Netherton, Merseyside; Birchwood in Lincoln; and Brookside in Telford. In the pages that follow I introduce these projects and put them in the context of previous experiences of community development, decline and revitalisation.

I then compare Big Local with past experience by reflecting on the work of three other projects: the Peckham Health Centre, established more than 90 years ago; the Deighton and Brackenhall Initiative in Huddersfield, which has now concluded; and Manor and Castle Development Trust in Sheffield, which has its roots in community action from the 1980s and is still going. I also spoke to academic and community development experts with many years' experience of neighbourhood-based projects.

In the final section I outline some possible scenarios for the future of community-based projects like Big Local, and set out some key principles that past experience suggests should apply to future initiatives.

Although this essay was commissioned by Local Trust and draws on a wide range of views and experiences, the opinions offered are my own and are put forward both as a contribution to the discussion about the Big Local initiatives' legacy, and as part of the wider debate on Britain's 'forgotten' neighbourhoods.


HELP YOURSELF
TO WHAT'S ON THE SHELF
Disabled toilet
& baby change
FREE FOOD
WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW
WHAT TO DO
PLEASE BE CONSIDERATE WHEN TAKING FOOD FROM THIS FRIDGE ONLY TAKE WHAT YOU NEED
PLEASE FILL IN THE VISITORS BOOK WHEN TAKING FOOD FROM THIS FRIDGE
Nikki Lane

CHAPTER TWO

Smells like community spirit

ON 25 SEPTEMBER 2017 A SEVEN-FOOT gash opened in a water main in Telford, Shropshire. Within 24 hours half the town and large areas of South Shropshire were without water, including the five thousand people living in Brookside. It was three days until the supply was restored. In the meantime Severn Trent, the local water company, had to deliver bottled water. But until the scale of the problem was realised, people on the estate had to fend for themselves.

At Brookside Big Local they talk about community spirit. When the Big Local scheme was being set up, residents on the estate said their top priorities included bringing back community spirit, changing the perception of Brookside, and providing more activities for young people. When I ask members of the Big Local board what they mean by community spirit, they talk about the water crisis.

Jackie Loveridge, one of the board members, explains how the estate mobilised. 'It was all on Facebook,' she says. 'Someone would say, *I've got pressure water, come and get a saucepan full, or I've got water, come and use my shower or bath*, and because it was all on Facebook everybody got to know. In a crisis I think everybody rallies round. Until something happens

nobody seems to know or they'll be in their own little world, but as soon as there's a crisis everybody's there, everybody comes out and helps.'

Clare Lloyd, Big Local acting secretary, chips in. 'On the Sunday before Severn Trent had managed to help, there were so many people that had got very low water pressure that were bottling up water and transporting it up all over the estate, and in return for that sometimes they were being given small bits of food because they hadn't got food that they could cook for their children or their partners.'

The next day Severn Trent delivered four pallets of bottled water to the local community centre. Volunteers worked all day handing out water to residents, who in turn would collect bottles for elderly or housebound neighbours.

James Loveridge, Brookside Big Local's chair, recalls: 'We stayed till eight o'clock on Monday night and emptied the pallet to people who'd been working and came home to find they'd got no water. Steve [the council's community worker] went round all the bungalows up the top, all the one bedroom bungalows, and saw to them that they'd got water, and then he came with me, I went down and found out who needed water in the bungalows behind us, where we'd got families ... there were six bottles in a rack, we took sixteen of them down to the bungalows to make sure the people there were all right.'

There are all sorts of ways of defining community: shared interests, a common location, a sense of identity created by class or culture, a history and a set of stories. But when the people at Brookside Big Local talk about community, it's these acts of mutual support that are uppermost in their minds. People helping each other, looking out for each other, caring for the environment they share.

Brookside was built in the 1970s on an undulating site in the south of Telford, part of the housing provided for residents of the new town built to accommodate the growing population of the West Midlands. The homes are low-rise, modest groups of two or three bedroomed family homes and clusters of bungalows, built on the back-to-front Radburn layout favoured at the time, with the front entrances clustered around walkways and green space and the backs to the roads.

The idea was to create the feel of a community in a park, and it still feels a bit like that. Mature oak and chestnut trees shed acorns and conkers around footpaths where kids meander home from school; pensioners' bungalows with blue or white painted doors are gathered around communal lawns. On a blustery October day it feels safe and homely.

They don't build estates on the Radburn layout any more. It didn't take long to discover that they provided a haven for petty criminals, who could deal drugs or commit burglaries or vandalise property or just race around on motorbikes with scant chance of being caught. As policing moved from the traditional beat to patrol cars and response teams, criminals realised they could disappear within the warrens of walkways and cul-de-sacs long before the law turned up.

There's no evidence of criminality when I visit, though. Steve Poole, the community worker, talks about the problem of fly-tipping, a constant bugbear on the estate, but seems pleasantly surprised that he can't find any to show me. He warns me to watch out for dog-fouling, but there's not much to see. It seems residents' concerns are getting through to the authorities. Yes, there's rubbish in a few gardens, some houses are boarded up, and some homes are poorly maintained with broken fences and peeling paint, but you notice them because they're the exceptions.

Fly-tipping and dog-fouling are big issues for the Big Local group. They might not appear as serious as violent crime or burglary, but they create an impression of an estate that is uncared-for, somewhere you wouldn't want to live. Big Local has worked with the estate's school to design posters reminding dog owners to dispose of dog-dirt properly. People take more notice when the kids have designed the posters, they say.

At the Brookside community centre you can now get dog-poo bags, so there's no excuse. Sam Smith, the new Big Local rep who previously worked for Stirchley and Brookside Parish Council, says children are now challenging adults to clean up after their dogs: 'They're on the park and they're seeing dogs and going, *Are you going to pick that up, sir? You can get some dog poo bags from the community centre.*'

Big Local would like to do a similar campaign to prevent fly-tipping, but the issues are more complex. Brookside started life as a council estate, at a time when social housing was seen as an acceptable option for ordinary working people. When the right-to-buy policy was introduced by the Thatcher government in the 1980s, it was thought that this would raise aspirations on council estates, giving local people a stake in their area and creating what the philosopher John Rawls called a 'property-owning democracy'.

The unintended consequence, three decades later, is deterioration. When the first generation who bought their council houses decided to move on, either because they could take advantage of rising property values or because they could no longer pay the mortgage, their homes were often bought by absentee landlords. Instead of estates being managed by one social landlord, it was now often impossible to know who owned the property.

‘The biggest problem from fly-tipping that we’re getting seems to be from landlords or their agents,’ James Loveridge says. ‘Somebody moves out or they’re evicted and they’re just throwing the stuff straight out and not arranging for skips or anything to have it removed.’

It’s that sense of neglect that bothers people. The Big Local plan for the area, created in consultation with residents and updated in 2016, shows a set of concerns that are typical of low-income areas. They include a degraded environment, with rubbish and dog-fouling, needles and drug paraphernalia. There is a collective lack of self-esteem, as if the whole community feel themselves tarnished as second-best: 27 per cent of local youngsters leave school with no qualifications, jobs are often short-term and poorly paid, and young families and older people feel isolated.

Brookside Big Local’s vision is to improve local services, create a cleaner environment, put on more activities and events, support social enterprises and create a network of volunteers to develop the community in line with residents’ priorities. This doesn’t seem a lot to ask. And while there’s a million pounds on the table to support it, the Big Local volunteers are already counting the pennies.

Sam Smith comments on the resourcefulness of local people. ‘Our events, they’re done on such a shoestring, but they’re amazing events,’ she says. ‘People from Brookside, I’ve noticed, they will do stuff and they will be, *We’ve got this much money but we don’t want to spend all that because we might need it*, so they’re very frugal.’

The biggest investment so far has been the redevelopment of the local community centre, which reopened in 2015 as Brookside Central, along with a refurbished local shopping parade. But the centre is run largely by volunteers, and it’s

characterised by people helping each other. A case in point is the community fridge, a kind of mini food bank where donations from two supermarkets are stored and those in need can get emergency food supplies. But it isn't only the shops that donate food.

James says many people who use the fridge 'will come back, probably the next day, and put something else in to replace it. They'll buy something, it's probably three for two, so they'll buy them and they'll only want one.' Sam Smith says this generosity is constantly there, below the radar: 'I think Brookside's a great place, where if somebody sees that you need help, even if they've got nothing themselves, they'll offer you their last £5 to get you to an interview.'

Community spirit defies definitions. Mutual support is part of it. So too is a shared sense of identity, which tends to be associated with the physical delineation of a neighbourhood. Stories and celebrations are part of the mix; so too is the way a community responds to a crisis.

People talk of community spirit, too, in terms of its absence. A lack of community spirit is associated with isolation and peripherality, and with fear and suspicion. There's often a sense of nostalgia attached: it's seen as something that used to exist and that needs to return.

What is striking is how such themes persist. Seventeen years ago the government of the day, led by a youthful Tony Blair, published a consultation document on its national strategy for neighbourhood renewal.[1] It noted that what it described as social capital within neighbourhoods tended to be undermined by a rapid turnover of residents and the fear of crime.

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[1] Social Exclusion Unit (2000). National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal: a framework for consultation. London: Cabinet Office.

The absence of trust or community spirit, it argued, was 'a key factor in decline', commenting: 'It is extremely hard to build community spirit when residents live under the shadow of threats such as crime, drugs, racism, and anti-social behaviour. And community spirit is hardly likely to flourish among properties that are boarded up, gutted or used as a base for crime.'

Ten years later Helen Newlove, whose husband had been kicked to death by a gang of teenagers in 2007 in front of their three young children, was commissioned by a new government to write a vision for 'safe and active communities'.[2] She too spoke about community spirit, advising residents concerned about crime to start by looking out for each other:

'While your ultimate aim might be to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour, your first step could be to develop a shared sense of community spirit. People will only be prepared to get involved in crime prevention if they feel ownership about where they live, have a sense of belonging and neighbourliness and a shared ambition to improve the area.'

In 2012, in the aftermath of the disturbances that had swept English cities the previous summer, a panel of experts reported on their impact on victims and communities.[3] They remarked how they 'were moved by the stories we heard of human loss, fear and abandonment as a result of the riots' - but 'we were also struck by the level of community spirit demonstrated in the aftermath'.

We can talk about community spirit, then, in terms of actions, attitudes and abilities. Actions because community

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[2] Newlove, H. (2011). Our vision for safe and active communities: A report by Baroness Newlove. London: Home Office.

[3] Riots Communities and Victims Panel (2012). After the riots: The final report of the Riots Communities and Victims Panel. Online: http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20121003200027/http://riotspanel.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Riots-Panel-Final-Report1.pdf

spirit, amorphous as it can sound, is manifest in people actually doing things for each other: sweeping the streets after a night of violence, sharing their food, or carrying water around to an elderly neighbour. Those actions are sparked by an attitude of generosity and reciprocity towards friends and neighbours - an attitude to some degree bounded by the locality.

But there also has to be an ability to act. Under what conditions might an attitude of generosity translate into action? That question takes us back to the observation that there are circumstances in which community spirit struggles to flourish. So we need to know what those circumstances are, and how to prevent them.

CHAPTER THREE

Unravelling and reweaving

STROLL ALONG THE CANAL TOWARDS THE L30 Community Centre in Merseyside on a warm August afternoon and you might imagine yourself living here. Coots and moorhens drift sleepily between the banks. Ripening elderberries cluster beside the towpath. Somewhere in the hushed distance between the low houses an old guy walks his dog.

It seems quiet here, I mention to Garry McCartney, the local area coordinator for Sefton Council. Garry has lived here most of his life, doing youth work, running community projects, and is now the key link between the council and the neighbourhood. He laughs.

A few months ago there a shooting right outside the community centre, he tells me. The victim was still lying on the ground when volunteers arrived for the Big Local meeting. Debbie Stephens, chief executive of the L30 Community Centre, recounts the story of a recent night when 20 youths were 'running wild' across the centre's roof. She was the last one in the building and, worried that things would get violent, called the police. We're really sorry, they told her, but we don't have anyone we can send.

'In the last six months it's been really tense,' Garry says.

‘The shooting focused our minds on what really matters. The dynamics of the community have changed. We report all this back to the police, but it’s a police issue.

‘They don’t do preventive policing now and the youths in the area know that. The youths know there’s no police helicopter anymore. There was a fire in the park and the youths just bricked the fire brigade.’

The park should be the pride and joy of L30’s Million, the Big Local project for the Netherton area. Big Local and Sefton Council spent £65,000 creating a skate park for local teenagers. There’s an outdoor gym and new play equipment. There are kids’ activities and in the summer an open-air cinema, where families from all around the estate turn up with blankets and beer and picnics.

But when I visit, the skate park is out of use after a wheelie bin was set on fire in the middle of it. Garry shows me where kids have taken an axe to one of the young birch trees. Apparently thirteen of them were vandalised, chopped or set on fire. ‘The park has a public space protection order, but the police don’t do anything,’ Garry says.

He and Debbie are convinced the problem isn’t the local youths that they know, but rival gangs from outside the area trying to claim their territory. ‘L30’s Million came just at the right time but four years down the line, with the cuts to the public sector and the police and the movement of gangs across borders, it’s hard to get a grip,’ Garry comments. ‘The youths aren’t at schools in the area so we don’t know who they are.

‘That’s the thing about this area, people know each other. The first shooting there were cars coming into the area and people didn’t know them. It didn’t feel right. The whole atmosphere changed around the community. People are scared.’

L30’s Million is doing all it can to change that atmosphere.

As in Telford, they talk a lot about community spirit and bringing people together. One of the first things L30's Million did was to reinstate the Netherton fireworks display, an annual event that lost its funding a few years ago.

'People are keen on what brings people together,' Debbie observes. 'The fireworks display gets 70 percent of the community out - it's only one night a year but it's building on that. When people are locking their doors twice as much you need to bring people together and give them something positive to focus on.'

Some might wonder why a community project should blow so much money on one night's entertainment. But it sends a signal that L30 hasn't been forgotten. Read the Big Local plan for the area and that sense of being forgotten is apparent. There used to be three banks on the local shopping square; they've gone, and residents complain that it's full of alcohol outlets and charity shops. There's nowhere to buy fresh fruit and veg. People talk about the need to feel safe again, to bring back a sense of belonging and ownership.

The sense of being forgotten isn't new. When the estate was built in the 1950s there was a plan to include a swimming pool; it never happened. A lack of decent public transport, a sense of disconnection and antisocial behaviour are all recurring themes. Netherton feels out on a limb - it's in Sefton, the more affluent end of Merseyside, but on the boundary with the city of Liverpool and the borough of Knowsley, both of which are much poorer.

Garry tells me many local people moved here because they had jobs at Girobank in nearby Bootle. Girobank was the people's bank, a public sector bank originally created as part of the Post Office and at one time accounting for 25 percent of customer deposits. By 1990 it had been privatised, and there

have been successive waves of job losses as the bank has passed from one owner to another. Girobank isn't the only thing that's gone. Simon Elliott, the local vicar, shows me the sites of two local high schools. Both have been demolished and children now have to travel out of the neighbourhood.

So the firework display is a sign that this is still a community with an identity and a heart. Twelve thousand people turned up at last year's event. 'For L30's Million to be able to bring it back, it's made the project visible to people and given them something to talk about,' Debbie says.

There are other signs Netherton hasn't been forgotten. On a scrubby patch of ground where a block of flats once stood behind the Marian Square shopping centre, a line of raised beds stretches across the site. There's a fine crop of courgettes and rainbow chard, gooseberry and blackcurrant bushes, and pink and purple cosmos flowers.

Richard Ayres, the community garden coordinator, works three days a week and has a background in therapeutic horticulture. On the day I visit a new volunteer has arrived, a guy who'd been off work with depression for two years. They made a bonfire, and he enjoyed that. It took him weeks to summon up the courage to walk in, but Richard hopes he'll be back for more.

One one side of the site they can't grow anything because it's all pulverised rubble where the flats used to be. One night someone broke in, made their own flower bed out of concrete blocks, planted it up with vegetables removed from the community raised beds and left the moniker 'Bert' at one end, made out of broken bits of concrete. Richard left some geraniums in the hope that they'd get looked after, but they were ignored. The Big Local team joke that Bert may be buried in the bed.

Around the perimeter of the site are fruit trees and hedging plants such as blackthorn and hawthorn, which will eventually create an edible screen around the site and a haven for wildlife. Richard hopes to sow meadow flowers over the rubble, and get a cabin so volunteers have somewhere sheltered when it rains.

For Richard, the community garden is about much more than sharing food and improving the look of a derelict site, important as these are. He mentions his new volunteer again. 'Hopefully if he keeps coming back and keeps feeling a bit more confident about stuff, and being outdoors helps him deal with the depression and all that kind of thing, in the end maybe he's the person who ends up being partly responsible for running this in a couple of years - to me that's what it's all about really.'

It's hard to know what difference that might make to a community. The tough lesson of projects like Big Local is that nothing is guaranteed, and very little is permanent. You might never see the impact of a person who is able to rebuild their life after suffering from depression or sickness or redundancy or family breakup, although the impacts of them not rebuilding their life can be obvious. You have to have faith that the invisible, unsung acts of kindness and hope will pay dividends that you might never see.

As a vicar, Simon is possibly more attuned to noticing the value of the invisible. When I ask him what has been best about Big Local, it's the less obvious stuff that he points out. 'Some of the stuff that's been done in the schools, [education on] drugs and legal highs, that was positive, getting some of that stuff out there - there's a long way to go but it's good to get involved in some of the stuff like that.

'The Sefton at Work scheme, knowing that people have been helped, that has really had results. The credit union getting set up ... I met a guy from there today, he said the membership

has just gone through the roof, and it's all local stuff that's gone to make an impact, not just [a temporary scheme for] a couple of months.'

Donna, who runs a shop in Marian Square and is one of the Big Local board members, highlights that Big Local is in it for the long term. It takes time to build community, and it happens by bringing people together repeatedly. L30's Million has funded street games for children over the summer, and it's brought parents together and built friendships.

'It's not just a quick fix,' Donna says. 'What people want is to tackle antisocial behaviour and bring community spirit a bit more together and stuff like that, things like that don't just happen overnight. So I think it's a good thing that it is a ten year project and things like that have to be worked on over a longer period of time, and we've got that time to do it.

'I think things like the street games and stuff, they're really good, because I went to the first street games and I've seen people that I grew up with that I haven't seen for years, and our children were playing together, so there's legacies from that, building friendships and community, so for lots of us that's been what's good about it really.'

There's no doubt that Big Local's events and activities have helped to build a sense of community. But a sense of community doesn't bring the police out when they're needed, or provide the public services local people rely on.

The anthropologist Edwin Ardener has suggested that 'remote areas', the communities that are distant or disconnected, are both full of innovators and chocked with the ruins of the past. Their landscape is scattered with 'the remains of failed innovations'[4]. They are seen as fair game for other

[4] Ardener, E. (2007). The voice of prophecy, and other essays. New York: Berghahn Books.

people's experiments, and subject to a 'peculiar driving force of abortive innovation'. Their identity is fashioned by others, through labels such as 'deprived' or 'marginal'.

The risk is that such communities become defined by a kind of frenetic neglect. Because they have big problems, they experience a constant succession of small - and sometimes not so small - interventions. But the interventions tend to be a response to a problem, rather than the steady work of building the everyday infrastructure of society. In the meantime, that fabric of everyday life is neglected. Schools are built and knocked down. Shopping centres are opened and then left. The routine maintenance of social life is ignored.

If you walk through Netherton, there are few signs that this everyday infrastructure is unravelling. The demolished schools are one; the run-down shopping centre is another; the vandalised trees are a third. But despite the fears of antisocial behaviour and organised criminal gangs, Netherton is still a place many people believe in.

Keeping it that way demands a degree of attention and investment, though, that is beyond the capacity of one Big Local scheme, even with a million pounds to spend over ten years. If we want to know what the future might look like, it's worth revisiting the past.

Eighteen years ago two housing experts, Anne Power and Katharine Mumford, charted the decline of urban neighbourhoods in Manchester and Newcastle that were facing abandonment and demolition.[5] They described whole streets vacated by their residents, emptying schools and creating conditions where criminal damage and antisocial behaviour could flourish. At the same time they highlighted what could

[5] Power, A. & Mumford, K. (1999). The slow death of great cities? Urban abandonment or urban renaissance. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

be done to prevent decline by investing in basic services such as policing and healthcare, and providing local, visible management at a neighbourhood level.

'Lavishing care on slowing the death of the most difficult urban neighbourhoods is a statement about the future, just as flowers are an affirmation of hope,' they wrote. 'It is obvious to an observer that these areas should not just waste away.'

Sometimes the obvious is the hardest thing to see. A more recent study of Bristol and Baltimore by two academics, Jonathan Davies and Madeleine Pill, found city authorities retreating from the neighbourhood level.[6] In Baltimore the most 'distressed' neighbourhoods were effectively being left to fend for themselves, becoming 'ungoverned spaces written-off by an elite city network and higher tiers of government committed to the revitalisation of the fittest'.

Netherton is a far cry from Baltimore. Nor is it like the neighbourhoods abandoned in Manchester and Newcastle in the late 1990s, although there may be signs of uncomfortably similar trends. Persistent deprivation, the decline of local services and a succession of short-term interventions are familiar features. Crime, and the fear of crime, are factors that change a neighbourhood from one where local people have a stake and a future to one that they want to leave.

Anne Power and Katharine Mumford talk of 'lavishing care' on a neighbourhood. L30's Million is doing exactly that. But if it's not accompanied by the ordinary, everyday care a community should expect from public services, it is hard to see why Big Local could or should be expected to plug the gap.

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[6] Davies, J. & Pill, M. (2012). Hollowing out neighbourhood governance? Rescaling revitalisation in Baltimore and Bristol. Urban Studies, 49(10), 2199-2217.

CHAPTER FOUR

A modest radicalism

THEY DON'T ASK FOR A LOT IN BIRCHWOOD. In many ways, the residents of this suburb on the southern fringe of Lincoln just want it to be seen as an ordinary neighbourhood. One where people don't look down on you when they tell them where you live, where they don't automatically associate your home with drugs or crime.

Things are much better than they were, says Eddie Strengiel, a local councillor and chair of Birchwood Big Local.

He compares the estate now with its reputation 30 years ago: 'I came out of the Army after 24 years and I bought the house on Birchwood Avenue. I used to go downtown - if you had to walk into a bank or they wanted your address, I used to say Birchwood Avenue, and there'd be this intake of breath as if to say *Oh God, you don't live there, do you?* To be honest it was like that in 1988, it was like downtown Beirut, it was awful. The antisocial behaviour that went on, the crime that went on, it was awful.'

Stigma has a way of sticking, even though Birchwood has changed in many respects. There's new private housing alongside the old social housing, which was designed, like Brookside, on the Radburn principles. The nearby RAF base

has closed and been redeveloped. The shopping centre has a thriving Co-op and Big Local has a base in one of the nearby retail units.

Walk around the estate and you notice the green space, the mature trees, the sense of openness. It doesn't feel as if fourteen thousand people live here. It clearly isn't affluent, but it's doesn't feel run-down or unsafe. When Eddie and his colleague Bill Toynton, a fellow Big Local board member and recently retired pastor of the nearby Life Church, show me around, they complain about litter and dog-fouling, but that's the worst of it. 'The history always follows you,' Bill observes. 'So I think there's still an element of people in Birchwood looking at their area with a little bit of shame in some respects.'

At Birchwood, too, they talk about community spirit. It's seen as the opposite of a sense of shame and stigma: a sense of pride and an ambition to do better. Yvonne Griggs, another member of the Birchwood Big Local partnership board, talks in terms of traditional working-class values - 'not shunning people, trying to accept people for who they are and what they are and what they can be, and I think that is what is important.

'It is a lovely place if you can get by. I have a scooter and I can get round and people do want to see better, they're getting proud of being on Birchwood.'

Part of that pride involves looking after the area's green spaces and providing activities for local kids. Tucked in a corner of the estate is Diamond Park, Birchwood's only dedicated play area for young children.

Unusually, it was installed not by the local council but by the congregation at Life Church. Back in 2004 they decided Birchwood needed a place where children could play safely and parents could meet and make friendships. But after thirteen years the play equipment was worn and in need of

replacement, and the church didn't have the capacity to take on the job.

Birchwood Big Local stepped in, funding the refurbishment of the park and getting local children to design a new logo. But members of the group were aware that anything they funded would need maintenance and repair. And they didn't only want to look after Diamond Park.

In the middle of the estate is Jasmin Green, a huge open space popular with dog walkers and surrounded by mature trees. Jasmin Green, like Diamond Park, is an asset for the community - but one that needs looking after at a time when local authority funding is diminishing. Meanwhile on the other side of the main road through Birchwood is Melbourne Park, another open space that would be an ideal site for young people's activities.

Out of the modest ambition of providing and maintaining play areas for local youngsters has come something more radical than any of the partnership's members initially envisaged: the Birchwood Area Community Land Trust. The trust will own the area's green spaces and maintain them using the revenue from a large triangle of land at one end of Jasmin Green that is being sold to provide affordable housing for older people.

Not only will there be much-needed new homes, but the rest of Jasmin Green will be preserved for community use and the ground rent will pay for the maintenance of the play areas.

As Eddie explains: 'The problem we've got is that we needed the revenue from a housing project to be able to deliver sustainability for the play parks and for Jasmin Green. The play parks was the original plan, the housing came when we realised we don't have a revenue stream for maintaining the play parks or putting new stuff in. Eventually the play parks

will need renewing and when the [Big Local] million pounds is gone it's gone.'

It's early days for the community land trust, but already Eddie and Bill have become its sales force, selling shares in the trust around the community. They want genuine community ownership, but also need to raise as much additional funding as they can as BACLT will be a separate entity to Birchwood Big Local.

It's taken a while to pull the community land trust idea together and persuade the local authority of its merits, too. With the help of the Lincolnshire Co-operative and the expert advice of John Mather, secretary of the Lincolnshire Community Land Trust, an agreement has now been reached and BACLT, with a chosen housing association partner, eventually hopes to become the owner of 60 homes that will enable elderly people to stay among friends and neighbours.

Ownership is not only about having an asset that generates an income, although that is what will enable progress to continue after Big Local comes to an end. It's about generating a different attitude to the estate. It's a modest ambition - to be like other ordinary neighbourhoods - but a radical one, because it involves a shift in the balance of power and responsibility.

'I think the ownership part of it is important,' Eddie comments. 'Jasmin Green is surrounded almost by housing, and with a shopping centre at the other end, so if we can get people to take ownership you won't see the sort of litter that you and I and Bill have seen this afternoon, which is a bit of a disgrace. That's part of our sustainability of course, to make sure that there's proper bins around. That takes time and it takes money and it also takes somebody, a contractor, and we'd have to pay the contractor...'

Having more bins and getting them used properly doesn't sound very radical. But if it means putting services under the control of the local community, that could be the start of something more ambitious.

Gill Hutchinson, the Big Local rep for the project, says the group is already doing more than they ever imagined: 'I don't think that five years ago when the group was sitting around tables in the local churches, kind of getting their heads around Big Local, that they'd actually have envisaged that they'd be owning land and taking on land. So I think because of that, anything is possible.

'Just as the community land trust came at the right time in the right way, and people here could see a purpose and a reason to get involved, then further down the line if the council approach this group ... if it's the right time and it feels right, then I think this is the kind of group that would say, let's give this a go.'

It's that under-the-radar, slowburn approach that is getting things done, says Ruth Farningham, who's working with Birchwood Big Local on behalf of Lincolnshire Co-op, the project's 'local trusted organisation'.

'I think why there is so much excitement in Diamond Park is that it was incredibly well loved, and incredibly well used, but what's happened is, it's been a process of probably nine months of basically building the friends here in the community, through doing a whole range of activities.

'The biggest thing is to try and get that community ownership so that when the park opens it's not trashed on the first night. To me the creation of that logo and the pride that all the kids had in taking part in that is almost as important as getting the play equipment in.'

The difference is a sense that things can be better, and that local people can play their part in that. They are no longer the problem but part of the solution. That changes the way individuals think about themselves.

Yvonne Griggs is a mainstay of Birchwood Big Local, but insists she's the one who has gained: 'I've got to say that Big Local's given me a lot more than I give. They've sent me on training courses and I'm actually realising that I can do a lot more, and because of that other people are saying, *if you can do it I certainly can*. I think that's something we really need to plug, that it's not just the big projects, it's the individuals in Big Local, and that is the way forward.

'I've had a brain injury, and I've also got Bell's Palsy and one side of my face doesn't work properly, and actually I've seen a brain specialist and he's told me not to give up Big Local, because my brain is working better. I've gone on a course and there were a lot of people who had degrees, and I found the course very challenging, hard, but it was brilliant and I have taken a course and I've passed. ... if Big Local can do that for me it can do it all over the place. I have confidence. This is what I think is so important, that people can improve their lot.'

That sense of achievement and ambition needs to be put in context. Many people in Birchwood are struggling to make ends meet. It may not be obvious when you walk around the estate, but some of the most impoverished people in Britain live here. Play areas and community activity might make them feel better about their lives, but they won't resolve issues of long-term poverty. And Ruth says people are already commenting on the reduction in public services, especially those geared to helping the most hard-pressed.

The Birchwood volunteers don't have the sense of being

abandoned that is evident in L30. Eddie insists people simply need to unlock their aspiration. 'Everybody has it built in them somewhere, even though they may be despondent and feeling down, you can bring people up, and that's my view on everything,' he emphasises. 'When I write about Birchwood, I say Birchwood's a great place to live - and hopefully that might rub off on somebody who thinks, *God, it's not bad, let's get out and do something*!'

Getting out and doing something does make a difference. It's one of the principles that lay behind the policies of localism pursued by the Coalition government of 2010-2015. People should be able to own assets within their communities, plan their own neighbourhoods, and have more say in the future of local services.

It can be easy to get carried away by ideas of community control. The prospect of communities owning assets, creating local services responsive to their friends' and neighbours' needs, and free from dependence on external bureaucracy, can be alluring. There is also evidence that it can work: examples include Coin Street Community Builders on the South Bank of the Thames in London, Walterton & Elgin Community Homes in Westminster, and the Scottish island of Eigg, bought by its inhabitants from a negligent landlord.

But community control is neither a quick fix nor a cheap one. In 2007 Barry Quirk, chief executive of Lewisham Council in south London, was commissioned by the government of the day to conduct a review of community asset ownership.[7] He prefaced his report with a stirring vision under the heading, 'Imagine this!':

[7] Quirk, B. (2007). Making assets work: the Quirk Review of community management and ownership of public assets. London: Department for Communities and Local Government.

'It is 2020 and communities across England have been revitalised from within. Local councils have been central to this economic and social renewal, working alongside each and every community in the country. Capable and confident, these communities are ready and willing to respond to the challenges and opportunities of the fast paced modern world. And after twenty years of sustained investment in community infrastructure, local economies are strong, particularly in those areas where poverty has persisted for generations. A new civic spirit sweeps through urban, suburban and rural communities alike – galvanising communities to harness their energies for the wider public good.'

It's safe to predict that we won't get there by 2020. In many neighbourhoods those aspirations are beginning to sound naive and foolish as food banks proliferate and local authority services shrivel. But at a time of shrinking services, the prospect of locally-owned and managed assets may also be the best hope of preventing or stemming decline. That's certainly the view at Birchwood, and Eddie and his Big Local colleagues feel they have a great record of improvement to build on.

Barry Quirk's review recognised that much had already been achieved in hostile circumstances. 'Confident, capable and ambitious community groups and social entrepreneurs can succeed on the flimsiest of asset bases and despite the apathy of established authority,' he wrote. 'But they are more likely to succeed if they are less under-capitalised and if they receive support and assistance from local public and other agencies.'

Assets can, of course, become liabilities: the leaky, draughty building owned by a community trust that cannot afford to maintain it; the overgrown and vandalised park;

the managed workspace that cannot find tenants. In such circumstances communities need more than ambition. They need expert advice and support, technical help at the right time, funding that enables further resources to be unlocked, and informed and supportive local authorities. And they need to be able to develop assets on their own terms, and not just because otherwise the local library, post office or arts centre would close.

That raises the question of why the communities that have least should be expected to invest most in the future of local services. To explore that question further, I'll take a look at three projects that began long before Big Local.

CHAPTER FIVE

By the people, for the people

MORE THAN 90 YEARS AGO, TWO DOCTORS in Peckham, south London, started an unprecedented experiment in community control. What if, they reasoned, instead of treating people when they were already ill, you could create a health service focused on healthy living and wellbeing?

It sounds a very contemporary concern. But this was long before the foundation of the NHS, and astonishing in its fundamental principle that local people were best placed to make decisions about their own lives. That principle echoes down the decades in the ethos of the Local Trust and the insistence that Big Local partnerships are driven by local residents' needs and choices.

The two doctors, George Scott Williamson and Innes Hope Pearse, started small, buying a house on a main street, Queen's Road, and kitting it out for medical consultations as well as providing a kitchen, playroom and clubroom. The facilities would be open every day except Sunday from 2pm until 10pm, and local families could join for a weekly subscription of sixpence, which included a regular 'health overhaul' conducted by one of the doctors. Between 1926 and 1929, 115 families joined what the doctors dubbed the Pioneer Health Centre.

Although Peckham was not impoverished at the time, the doctors were surprised at the extent of ill-health they discovered. They decided to close the house on Queen's Road and open a purpose-built health centre, catering to a population of up to 2,000 families. The new building was opened in 1935 on nearby St Mary's Road, featuring the second-biggest swimming pool in London, a gym, play area, theatre and games rooms as well as the doctors' consulting rooms.

Writing in 2007, the educationalist David Goodway commented: 'This unconventional allocation of space decisively indicates that the Centre's emphasis was not on the diagnosis of illness but the promotion of healthy, social, life-giving activity and goes far to explain why it was so loved by the surrounding neighbourhood, whose community centre it became.'[8]

But the Second World War interrupted the centre's endeavours, and the founding of the National Health Service in 1948 challenged its principles.

Where the Pioneer Health Centre was cooperative and financed through subscription, the principle of the NHS was that care should be free. Where the Peckham experiment emphasised families and locality, the NHS put the individual first. Where Williamson and Pearse stressed a holistic approach to wellbeing, the NHS adopted the traditional medical view of 'patients' as individuals with illnesses that needed appropriate treatment. And where the NHS insisted on consistency, the Peckham centre wanted autonomy.

The tensions between the two models proved impossible to resolve, and there was no place for the Pioneer Health Centre in the new NHS. It closed its doors in 1951.

[8] Goodman, D. (2007). Anarchism and the welfare state: the Peckham Health Centre. History and Policy, 1 May 2007. Online: http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/anarchism-and-the-welfare-state-the-peckham-health-centre

The Peckham story illustrates a tension that has persisted ever since. It is a tension between the principles of localised, autonomous mutual aid and the principles of basic rights, equality and consistency enshrined in the welfare state. This tension reveals both the potential and the weaknesses of Big Local projects.

Big Local was founded on a sense that lessons had to be learned from the past. It is premised on a 'belief that previous programmes have often failed because they have given residents insufficient control and placed too many requirements on the investments that have been made'.[9] Five factors were identified as key in enabling people in marginalised or 'forgotten' neighbourhoods to take greater ownership of their future. These were:

- The pace of development - the programme had to work as and when residents were ready, not box them into preset timetables;
- Starting with assets not deficits - the programme had to build on communities' strengths, rather than label their areas as deprived or failing;
- Willingness to take risks - the programme had to have room for experiments and mistakes;
- Light touch support - help at hand when required, but without oppressive monitoring and control;
- Peer support and opportunities for reflection - sharing stories and providing opportunities for participants to learn from each other.

[9] Baker, L., Hennessey, C., & Taylor, M. (2013). Big Local: What's new and different? Institute for Voluntary Action Research. Online: https://www.ivar.org.uk/research-report/big-local-whats-new-and-different/

On the spectrum between autonomous mutual aid and state provision, Big Local lies towards the mutual aid end. It's more like Peckham's Pioneer Health Centre than the NHS. So it may be helpful to place it in the context of a rich history of thinking and action about mutual aid or 'self-help', as it's often described.

Philosophically, such ideals are often rooted in a belief that the bureaucratic and powerful state is the problem rather than the solution. From the anarchist theories of Kropotkin and Proudhon to the 'little platoons' of Edmund Burke, such beliefs put ideas of community centre stage. Those ideas range from a construction of community in opposition to a repressive or interfering state, in which self-organised groups develop and test new ways of building society, to a more traditionalist view that governments should not do what people can do for themselves. On that spectrum, Big Local is less about insisting on individual responsibilities and removing the 'burden' of support than about enabling new forms of community-building to emerge.

In practical terms, Big Local projects seek to maximise local autonomy in the context of shrinking state provision, but frequently lack the resources or history of activism that might boost their chances of going it alone. This is not a new dilemma. Again, the late 1990s provide evidence of previous efforts to resolve the conundrum.

In the maelstrom of policy formulation after Tony Blair's first election victory in 1997, a welter of reports analysed the many 'wicked issues' challenging local and national government. People living in poverty, and communities characterised by poverty, were viewed in terms of 'social exclusion' and the challenge was perceived as one of reconnecting such people and communities with wider society.

Among the many 'policy action teams' convened by Tony Blair's Social Exclusion Unit was one on community self-help.[10] Its remit was to create an action plan to get more people involved in volunteering and community activity; increase the viability of community groups and services they deliver; and encourage the growth of informal mutual support.

On its opening page the policy action team's report proclaimed: 'Self-help is an end in itself, as well as a means to an end. It is at the core of the empowerment of communities - whether through owning and running assets of their own, or through the acknowledgement of public authorities that local communities may be the best people to judge what is in their best interests. It is about involvement and consultation, but also about moving towards self-sufficiency. It is, in its purest form, about communities shaping their own destiny - doing, not being done to.'

Among the team's recommendations was the creation of 'neighbourhood endowment funds', for local communities to allocate as they wished:

'Such funds would have two main benefits: first, there would be direct gain through the uses to which the money is put for the good of the community; and second, there would be a substantial gain in community cohesion through the process of setting up and operating a system of funding owned and operated within the community.'

The ultimate aim, the report said, should be to have such funds established in 'at least the three thousand identified poorest neighbourhoods'. There's more than a foretaste of Big Local here, although the Big Local funds only stretch to 150 neighbourhoods. Big Local might seem new and radical to

[10] Home Office (1999). Community self-help - policy action team no.9. London: Home Office.

many, but it taps into a long history.

That raises two questions. The first is how to make change stick, when so many initiatives of the past have come unstuck. The second is how to connect local change, often at a very small scale, with the wider changes required to end the perpetual cycle of renewal and decline in which the benefits, ultimately, appear to flow out of localities rather than into them.

Fifty years ago the American psychologist Frank Riessman was asking similar questions. In the mid-1960s Saul Alinsky, author of *Rules for Radicals* and the founder of the community organising movement, had attracted national attention in the United States. People were asking whether he'd discovered a way of revitalising deprived neighbourhoods and giving citizens the tools they needed to change their prospects.

Riessman, in an article for the journal *Trans-Action*, pointed out that 'Alinsky has organised more than 2,000,000 people in forty-four communities over the last thirty years but it is striking that so few people knew about it. Until very recently neither the public at large nor most social scientists had even heard of Alinsky and the communities he has helped to build. ... But we suspect also, that the millions of people organised by Alinsky have not wielded much influence outside of narrowly confined local areas.'[11]

The crucial thing, Riessman suggested, was to create 'a changed equilibrium, a crisis, an opening, around which other elements in the change process may operate. The issue then is what kind of social action is most appropriate as a significant element in major social change'.

[11] Riessman, F. (1965). Self-help among the poor: new styles of social action. Trans-Action, September/October 1965, 32-37.

In a recent submission to a parliamentary inquiry, Local Trust, which funds and facilitates the Big Local partnerships, stressed the significance of putting local communities in charge of change: 'It shifts the centre of gravity away from grant makers and funders towards communities – they are best placed to identify local need. They will make mistakes as well as having successes, the point is there is a sense of ownership over the process, and time to build on learning.'[12]

The issue is not whether Big Local makes any difference, but what kind of difference it might be expected to make, and how that might link to wider processes of change - whether there is the possibility of 'a changed equilibrium'. To examine that question further we'll visit two other projects that preceded Big Local, but have addressed related issues.

[12] Local Trust (2017). Committee on citizenship and civic engagement call for evidence. Online: http://localtrust.org.uk/library/research-and-evaluation/submission-to-committee-on-citizenship


TOPLINE
DEIGHTON
CARNIVAL
CELEBRATEING
DIVERSITY
WHITACRE
CLOSE

CHAPTER SIX

We did it our way

NORTH AND EAST OF HUDDERSFIELD town centre is a bank of rolling hills that separate the communities of Kirklees from the towns of Calderdale. Across them runs the M62, the main east-west traffic artery for the north of England. There is plenty of open space and woodland, and easy access to the cities of Leeds and Bradford as well as the town centre.

This is also the home of a large area of working-class housing where the tensions between public services and local leadership have ebbed and flowed over the last two decades. The Deighton and Brackenhall Initiative was a programme that sought to reinvest profits from large-scale redevelopment into local communities.[13] This section draws on an evaluation of the initiative, conducted in 2011. Its title was *We did it our way*. Although the Big Local areas are much more modest in their scope and scale, many of the aspirations were similar.

The area covered by the Deighton and Brackenhall Initiative (DBI), which began in 1997, was mainly developed from the 1940s in the style of the municipal 'cottage' estates

[13] Dobson, J. (2011). We did it our way: an evaluation of the Deighton and Brackenhall Initiative. Unpublished report.

prevalent in the interwar period. Three large council estates were built between the older settlements of Fartown, Sheepridge and Deighton. The Brackenhall, Riddings and Bradley estates effectively marked the wedge of land between Bradford Road, Leeds Road and Bradley Road as an area of social housing.

Brackenhall was the largest of the three estates. At first it was considered one of the most desirable places to live in Huddersfield. For people used to cramped town centre back-to-backs, sometimes squashing as many as ten people into a two-bedroomed cottage, it was a haven of peace and green space. But by the 1980s and 1990s, for many Huddersfielders, Brackenhall and Riddings had become synonymous with drugs, crime and deprivation.

Brackenhall hit the headlines for disturbances in July 1992 and September 1993. Some describe them as riots; others say they were blown up out of proportion. Whatever the truth, they had the effect of confirming outsiders' prejudices. By 1997, nearly a fifth of the homes were unoccupied. People were leaving faster than Kirklees Council could find new tenants. The council decided the only solution was to demolish much of Brackenhall and replace it with private housing.

The notoriety that led to the decision to redevelop is one part of the Deighton and Brackenhall story. A parallel story is one of local people battling against the odds, a story of community spirit and local identity. Brackenhall's football team was among the most respected in Huddersfield because of the vociferous support it enjoyed. There was a strong core of local voluntary activity, centred around the United Reformed and Catholic churches, the working men's club and local employment initiatives.

In 2003 a 'regeneration masterplan' was drawn up, based

on five years of consultation and discussion. Its vision was of 'an area without stigma in which people and businesses thrive and where public services are provided in partnership with the community'. Those words could be taken from a typical Big Local plan. There was no external funding, but DBI came up with a scheme to reinvest a portion of the profits from the Brackenhall redevelopment through a 'community dividend', eventually totalling £8 million, that would pay for services and activities, including the local carnival, a community centre, youth, sports and arts activities.

The masterplan set out a plan to 'tackle the root causes of deprivation and social exclusion through engaging, listening to and building the capacity of the community to play a full and equal part in the regeneration process', premised on a change in the social mix of the area by replacing a large area of council housing with new private homes. At root, though, the ambitions were to build community spirit and provide a place to meet, childcare, and youth work; and to tackle crime and the area's reputation for criminal activity.

'Community spirit' in such a neighbourhood comes with a paradox: it is both sustained by investment in local facilities and services, and grows in opposition to the neglect and bureaucracy often associated with public services. The core of local activists who were stalwarts of the area, running church-based organisations such as the Boys' Brigade and social activities, also led protests against the plans to demolish and rebuild most of Brackenhall.

They had reasons to be suspicious. Tony Hood, chief housing officer at Kirklees Council during the 1990s, was one of the people interviewed for the evaluation. He commented: 'The history of housing management is full of people saying what we ought to do is put them all in one estate and put a

ring of steel around it and leave them. That's a police view quite often.

'Frankly I think that's what they regarded Brackenhall as. It was an area where they knew where to find people, they had it ringed, they weren't going to go in there willingly, they weren't bothered if there were crimes being perpetrated by people living in the estate.'

This was an area where a strong sense of community spirit and the bullying, harassment and robbing of neighbours - especially newcomers - existed side by side. But too often neither public services nor local residents saw changing this as their responsibility. Relations with the police were tense, if not antagonistic, leading to a tendency for many residents to suffer in silence. Housing officers saw their responsibility as letting houses, schools as teaching. What went on beyond their professional boundaries was often ignored.

DBI's aim was to change not only the physical aspects of the area but also the attitudes that isolated it. Because its funding was largely secured through the community dividend, it was free of government targets and restrictions and could build local leadership and spend its resources at its own pace, just as the Big Local areas can do. The idea was that local people should set the agenda and that the programme should build on what residents valued, but statutory service providers were also involved from the outset.

Consultations with residents elicited a familiar set of priorities: tackling crime, providing more activities for children and young people, creating play areas. And despite the area's reputation, three quarters of residents said they were very or fairly satisfied with the area where they lived and four out of five were satisfied with their home.

It is not surprising that many perceived the redevelopment as an act of violence. One local activist, Margaret Lees, said local people had thought that only empty homes would be demolished. 'It wasn't what they were doing but the way they were doing it,' she said. 'We didn't want to lose our homes just so they could build posh houses.'

At the time of the evaluation in 2011, there was still hostility between longstanding local residents and the occupants of the new housing, which had been rebranded as Ferndale. But there was also a strong perception that the community was on the up, with particular appreciation of the services provided by the social enterprise Fresh Horizons at the Chestnut community centre, which housed a nursery and the local library and made a point of prioritising the employment of local people.

DBI was always going to come to an end when funds from the community dividend ran out. The idea was that by then the fundamental problems of the area would have been addressed. Much of its work would be taken forward by Fresh Horizons, acting as a 'community anchor' for the area.

DBI's activities wound down in 2013, and Fresh Horizons went into liquidation in 2016. A new company, Local Services 2 You, continues to run social enterprises providing a social club, nurseries and the Chestnut Centre. To that extent there is continuity and a legacy has remained from DBI; the physical redevelopment of the estate, and the stories associated with it, will also remain long after DBI has been forgotten.

But the evaluation highlighted continuing challenges. These could not be resolved by the community acting alone. The report observed: 'We can expect the challenges of poverty and low income to remain for many years to come. That will require long term support to enable local people not only to

compete for the jobs that are available, but to earn a living by doing for themselves the work in their area that is often done by outsiders. This will require support in terms of confidence-building, business skills, and vocational qualifications. The benefits of such support may not be seen for several years.'

The problems of poverty have shifted over the last decade, from a lack of access to jobs to a predominance of precarious, low-paid work that does not offer a platform for a secure future. If areas like Deighton and Brackenhall are to continue to help themselves, however strong the sense of independence and self-reliance, they will need a bedrock of support. But how much support is enough?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mind your Manor

TUCKED BEHIND THE QUADRANT business centre, just off the Parkway which connects Sheffield city centre with the M1, is an unassuming Portakabin where Debbie Mathews has her office. It's the kind of hut you might expect to house a community organisation: cheap, grey, on the edge of a car park. What you might not guess is that Manor and Castle Development Trust, the organisation Debbie runs, actually owns the Quadrant and the only reason she's in the Portakabin is that the Quadrant is full to capacity with paying tenants.

Those paying tenants keep the trust going. In 1999, when the Social Exclusion Unit was researching community self-help, Manor and Castle was one of the organisations its policy action team visited. Nearly two decades on, Manor and Castle Development Trust is still helping people in one of Sheffield's poorest areas to look after themselves.

Roy Hattersley, former deputy leader of the Labour Party and at one time chair of Sheffield Council's housing committee, infamously described the Manor in 1995 as the worst estate in Britain. Rather like Birchwood and Brackenhall, it was a reputation that grew the further from the estate you got.

What nobody disputed is that the Manor estate was poor, and still is. In the early 1990s one third of the adult population were out of work as Sheffield's manufacturing industries collapsed. Today many more have jobs, but the problems of persistent poverty remain. There is also a history and a continuity of community activity, with Manor and Castle Development Trust at its heart.

The trust grew out of employment projects that began in the wake of the factory closures. 'A group of local people who'd all been made unemployed, couldn't access the jobs that were on offer, actually illegally occupied a disused city council depot at the bottom of Prince of Wales Road,' Debbie Mathews recounts.

'David Blunkett was the leader of the council at the time, and rather than go through the legal process of evicting those people, he actually put some resources in to support them. What he recognised was they'd took over the site in order to set up businesses, so there was a mechanic who'd set up in there, there was a nursery, there was a cleaning company, there was a sewing company, so it was all local people who couldn't get paid work but wanted to take some control.'

This self-organised assertion of local skills and abilities became the Manor Employment Project. It was the precursor of a more holistic regeneration programme funded by the Single Regeneration Budget in the late 1990s. Alongside funding for community development, education and training, and the Green Estate company which looks after local open spaces, there was a succession of housing redevelopment and modernisation schemes.

Debbie points to two reasons why Manor and Castle Development Trust has survived. The first was that there was a recognition from the outset that change takes time. The

Single Regeneration Budget programme lasted seven years, but even that was not going to be enough. The second factor, connected to that recognition, was that a way had to be found to continue the work when support from national and local government stopped.

'We built an asset base, basically,' she says. 'We'd accidentally ended up with shops because we'd ended up having to buy them off absentee landlords, so we became a landlord and created an income stream from that.

'And we were in the right place at the right time to get the opportunity to buy this land that Quadrant's based on, and having the confidence and the audacity I suppose to take on an £11m project that would build managed workspace, in what was actually a failing economic zone - so it was that foresight, knowing that the grants were going to start disappearing and we needed to carry on doing the things that matter to local communities.'

The things that matter, in Debbie's view, are remarkably similar to the things that matter to people in the Big Local areas and in Deighton and Brackenhall. They include tackling crime, improving the look and feel of the area (especially open spaces), providing a place where people can meet, and facilitating opportunities to bring people together through events and activities.

That ubiquitous but nebulous thing called community spirit comes to the fore here. People might not be able to define it precisely, but they know the Manor has it.

'I think there is a really strong sense of community,' Debbie comments. 'We do work with older people and a lot of that's just been about connecting people up so that they're not isolated. And there is a really strong sense of people looking after each other still.

‘There’s a long way to go, there are people who are still isolated, but actually we’ve got a lot of things we can link people into and that works. Interestingly things like arts and crafts - you put a couple of sessions on in a centre, word of mouth gets out and people will turn up. And then they support each other.’

But without some help, those connections aren’t made. ’In order to support people to become organised and to tackle the things that matter to them, they do need a level of support. And that might just be somebody who goes, *I’ll find you somewhere to meet, I’ll organise a meeting, and I’ll put a Facebook post to advertise it, and then you can crack on. But actually if you need some help I’m here and I’ll support you to do whatever it is you need*. So it’s just having that light touch approach, particularly in areas where there is a low level of social capital and resources. Wherever you’ve got a poorer community people’s lives tend to be that much more pressured.’

Those pressures are manifest in problems that are less visible and less pervasive in more affluent areas. One is the degree of mental stress people are under. ‘We’ve just run a programme with people who are furthest away from the job market, they’re on employment support, and all of them have got mental health problems,’ Debbie says. ‘And we’ve got 14 people come on this programme, and the worker who runs it is nearly having a breakdown because it’s so challenging. But every single one of those people have actually stayed with the programme.’

For one participant, it was a huge achievement to turn up for four weeks. When she first came she had to be accompanied by a psychiatric nurse and was in tears throughout the session. By the fourth week she had gained the confidence to read a poem she had written. Programmes

like this help individuals to cope and to survive huge personal difficulties. It is not realistic to think in terms of changing a community or neighbourhood.

In the meantime, the external stresses grow. The reputation of the Manor in the 1990s was connected with unemployment and problems of low-grade but highly visible antisocial behaviour and vandalism, Debbie says. Now the problem is organised crime.

'I think now what's different is it's organised criminal activity, and where you've got poverty you've got a market on two grounds. One is you've got a market for the drugs, and you've also got a market for prostitution and supply, so it's people who'll do anything for a few quid, basically. And I know that we've also got a real issue with illegal loan sharks in our area, and that's all linked to organised crime. It's not mafia territory yet, but if it's not dealt with it could, it could get a stranglehold.'

Coming from someone who has worked in the same neighbourhood for nearly 20 years, this is not a warning to be taken lightly. Seven years of austerity and of unprecedented cuts to public services are taking a toll.

The Manor is still a neighbourhood under pressure. While not every Big Local area faces the same scale of deprivation, some do. In such circumstances a trusted community organisation that has stood the test of time and can forge links with service providers can be a lifeline.

Debbie Mathews emphasises that sustained and independent funding has been key. 'I think the only way that you can sustain communities like ours is by bringing in money that's not reliant on the local population - which is why the Quadrant for us is so important,' she says.

'We will charge commercial rates. We're very careful with

the market, you have to watch your market, but it's about making money. And if you want to sustain communities where 80 percent of the community's financially hard pressed, the only way you can do it is by redistributing wealth by the back door as I call it.

'I think really if you truly want a sustainable community you need 80 per cent of the population to be financially secure, which means that they can support in one way or another the 20 percent of the population who aren't economically secure for whatever reason, whether they're physically disabled or whether they are refugees or they have got mental health problems or learning difficulties. In Manor the statistics show that 80 percent of the population are financially hard pressed.'

In the Big Local areas, too, people are hard pressed. Perhaps not as high a proportion or over such a long time as at the Manor, but Big Local areas are not affluent. To stop such communities declining, Debbie Mathews argues that a basic level of public service provision is a prerequisite.

'I don't know how you'd quantify that, but for me housing which is properly managed is obviously essential. I think policing, and I think it has to be neighbourhood policing. I think we've got to at least have some management of the open spaces, not necessarily cutting grass, but having more creative ways of having open spaces that people can use positively. And I think you have to have some level of community development work going on, community engagement, and it has to be consistent.'

Big Local is not about public services; in fact there has been been a strong push to advise residents not to use the Big Local funds to make up for the loss of public service provision. That's easier to argue in principle than in practice. And to

consider both how to make the most of Big Local and how best to build on its work when the funds disappear, we need to pay attention to context.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Beyond Catch-22

IN JOSEPH HELLER'S FAMOUS SECOND world war novel, Catch-22, a bomber pilot, Orr, faces the dilemma of putting his personal safety at risk every time he gets in his plane. Continuing to do so would prove he was insane and therefore not fit to fly. But refusing to fly would show he was sane, and so he would have to keep flying.

The history of government policy on distressed and deprived neighbourhoods suggests a similar Catch-22. The worse off and more troubled your area is, the more pressure you face to mobilise your own resources to change things. But the more successful you are at mobilising your own resources, the less support you are likely to get.

It is, of course, never intentional and the dilemma may not be as blatant. But rhetoric of empowerment and self-help over many years has often been accompanied by an assumption that external assistance will be scaled back as communities deal with the problems they face. Funds are allocated with an agenda of 'pump priming' or 'sustainability': a view that a little bit of help will bring about long term, lasting change.

At a time when public services are financially challenged, the arrival of help from one source can become an excuse to

withdraw support from another. An interim evaluation of Big Local conducted by the Third Sector Research Centre found 'concerns that Big Local is picking up the pieces from the cuts in public services'. This was a particular challenge where non-statutory services such as youth activities were being cut.[14]

Policymakers don't set out to create a Catch-22. It happens when an influx of resources or an expansion of activity at local level coincides with pressure to reduce costs more generally. The resources coming in, though, seldom match those being pulled out. But the Catch-22 of disadvantaged neighbourhoods is not inevitable.

This essay has sought to explore how relatively small scale grants, sustained over a decade and given light-touch support - 'on tap, not on top', as the saying goes - can make a lasting difference. The differences highlighted in the three Big Local projects featured here are modest but significant.

They are especially significant for the individuals at the heart of Big Local, and for a range of households they come into contact with; but also for the communities that benefit from new facilities such as the play areas at Birchwood, environmental improvements such as those prioritised at Brookside, or events that bring isolated people and communities together, like the firework displays and outdoor cinema in L30.

Gandhi famously proclaimed that people should be the change they want to see in the world. Big Local projects emphasise changes that generate mutual support, togetherness, and small but significant acts of practical help, and build skills and confidence. In communities with

[14] Local Trust (2017). Big Local: Beyond the early years. Online: http://localtrust.org.uk/library/research-and-evaluation/our-bigger-story-beyond-the-early-years

a history of being considered second-best, that support and confidence is essential, and when individuals grow more confident it ripples out. But 'being the change' individually, or as a household, or even as an entire neighbourhood, is only half the story.

The wider learning of community development and regeneration programmes, here and elsewhere, is that context is key. A neighbourhood is not a black box that can be examined and experimented on and 'regenerated' in isolation from the wider world. 'Change' is not only about locality: it is about locality within society. And this is where self-help and social infrastructure must be built together, not as mutually exclusive alternatives or disconnected agendas.

Local Trust's vision is that every area it works with should be 'resilient, confident and a good place to live'. Its core belief is that resident-led action develops local skills and confidence, builds on each community's skills and assets, and creates long-term, lasting solutions. There is no doubt, from the visits to Big Local projects described here and from the ongoing evaluation, that skills and confidence are being developed and that projects are building on local assets.

However, it's worth unpacking the notion of resilience. There are many ways of thinking about resilience, from the ability to 'bounce back' in the face of a crisis, to a more forward-looking vision of adaptation and evolution. At a community level, though, it has tended to be attached to notions of 'getting by' as resources, both local and external, diminish.

A study in Northern Ireland in 2015 found that residents of poor communities felt 'being resilient was not about "bouncing back", "flourishing" and "thriving" in the face of adversity - it was about "not being overcome", "getting-by", enduring, surviving, just "getting on with things", and "keeping

heads above the water"'.[15]

Another study in Sheffield, published in 2013, warned that resilience 'is a strategy for helping communities cope with adversity, rather than overturning structural inequalities. It can help communities to "beat the odds", but it cannot "change the odds" by removing the causes of adversity'.[16]

The Sheffield study identified four ingredients that helped some communities manage adversity better than others: 'gathering places' or community venues where people could get together; a sense of belonging 'rooted in common interests and experiences'; information sharing at a local level, and a 'community voice' that could be heard beyond the neighbourhood; and a combination of passionate individuals and local amenities and facilities that could provide a base for activities.

The three Big Local projects featured here reveal three of these ingredients - community venues, a sense (at least among the people I met) of shared interests and experiences, and passionate individuals. Whether their voice resonated beyond the neighbourhood, informing local decision-making, was less obvious, although there was some evidence of it at Birchwood.

But the Sheffield study also highlighted a fifth essential ingredient. It observed: 'Even resilient communities will continue to require the support of public services to mediate the impact of stressors and support the on-going development, engagement and realisation of collective capacity.' This is an increasing challenge in Big Local areas.

So we must ask how the vision of localities that are

[15] Hickman, P., et al (2015). 'Getting-by', coping and resilience in difficult times: final report. Sheffield: Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research.

[16] Platts-Fowler, D., & Robinson, D.(2013). Neighbourhood resilience in Sheffield: getting by in hard times. Sheffield: Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research.

'resilient, confident and a good place to live' connects to long-term change: how can these become thriving, flourishing communities?

In an earlier essay published by Local Trust, the author David Boyle observes that 'the possibility of change ... is held out, bravely, without instructions, targets or theory. It is monumentally English in its refusal to instruct or theorise, but it is still revolutionary'.[17] There are parallels with the self-organised mutual support observed in the context of household work by the academics Richard White and Colin Williams, and described by them as a way of building community that 'actively rejects the desire to produce ready-made, ready-to-hand solutions through blueprints, maps and other essentialist commentary'.[18]

To consider the scope for such community-building, in the context of broader economic and social developments, we might pose a range of scenarios. These scenarios are speculative, but not imaginary: they draw on previous experience of place-based initiatives.

SCENARIO 1: Reweaving the fabric.
Possible model: Goodwin Development Trust, Hull.

In this scenario, the work of Big Local projects is supported and continues beyond the completion of Big Local itself. The priorities remain broadly similar: building community skills and confidence, mostly through small-scale and highly personal interactions, initiatives and events. The principle of

[17] Boyle, D. (2017). The grammar of change: Big Local neighbourhoods in action. London: Local Trust.
[18] White, R., & Williams, C. (2014). Anarchist economic practices in a 'capitalist' society: Some implications for organisation and the future of work. Ephemera, 14(4), 951-975.

resident leadership remains. Over time, new volunteers are recruited and trained; some of the original participants build the confidence to start projects and initiatives of their own; a rich web of local activity develops, supported and promoted through a neighbourhood hub where voluntary groups and statutory services come together, discuss issues of mutual concern and complement each other's work.

SCENARIO 2: Building local assets.
Possible model: Coin Street Community Builders, London.

Recognising that funds from statutory services cannot be guaranteed, community leaders or development charities create their own funding streams. They might do this through community owned housing, acting as a landlord and reinvesting rent surpluses; by operating social enterprises that create employment or reinvest in the local community; or by renting out shops and business premises. The income stream funds services such as community centres and youth clubs that might otherwise be closed or neglected. However, there are risks. An income stream can quickly turn into a loss-making business.

SCENARIO 3: Alternative enclaves.
Possible model: Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust.

The most radical version of the self-help model is for a community to take over entirely: to own the land and housing, to run its own services, and to organise itself democratically. The Isle of Eigg in the Western Isles of Scotland, bought by the local community in 1997, is a step in that direction. Its remoteness means that people have to devise their own solutions; the heritage trust now runs its own renewable energy grid, operates a multi-purpose community centre and

is restoring the island's natural environment. But its small scale and remoteness make it an exceptional case: it does not share the characteristics of the Big Local neighbourhoods, which must interact with housing, education, healthcare and transport systems and fit in with local labour markets and decision-making processes.

SCENARIO 4: Perpetual regeneration.
Possible model: Broadwater Farm estate, Haringey.

A succession of local initiatives mitigates, but does not address, deep-seated social and economic challenges. For some public servants the aim is to contain and control difficulties, not to support and build people's lives. Infrastructure and improvements achieved in partnership with local residents are put at risk by the next big idea. There is recurring talk of large-scale redevelopment, leaving residents feeling threatened and vulnerable.

Scenario 5: Institutionalised neglect.
Possible model: abandoned neighbourhoods of the 1990s.

In this scenario, areas characterised by poverty and low economic activity are put in the 'too difficult' folder. While small-scale local initiatives may take place and some dedicated public servants work closely with local communities, the major public service organisations turn their attention elsewhere or imagine the slate can be wiped clean through demolition and redevelopment. Lessons from previous projects and programmes are filed and forgotten. The stigma of the 'sink estate' becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, created through the negligence of public bodies, perpetuated by national and local media, and blamed on local residents.

These scenarios are all possible, to different degrees in different neighbourhoods. With the exception of the Eigg model, each one is predicated on a set of relationships, healthy or toxic, between local residents and the statutory services operating locally. Self-help and mutual aid are often described as alternatives to the provision of public services, and can arise in opposition to the activities of statutory bodies or to fill gaps official agencies have left. But they do not exist in a vacuum: their success and impact is intertwined with the success and impact of local services.

There is a paradox at the heart of Big Local that must be embraced if its effects are to last and be magnified. That is that the greater the change local people want to see, the more robust the everyday infrastructure must be that enables such changes to take place. The more self-help and local upskilling people want, the more effective the wider network of public services needs to be. The way out of the Catch-22 of self-organisation or external support is to accept that investment is needed in both. Big Local will work best when it complements improvements in local services, not when it is seen as an alternative to them.

So how might local neighbourhoods make the best of Big Local, both now and beyond the life of this particular initiative? Based on learning from previous programmes, three central principles emerge. None of them are new or radical, and most will seem obvious. The challenge is making them stick.

PRINCIPLE 1: Invest in everyday infrastructure. Localities require a core level of basic services, consistently funded and at a scale that provides reliability, accountability and adaptability. At a minimum these should include decent

housing, environmental services such as rubbish disposal and open space maintenance, primary healthcare, education and vocational training, and the provision and maintenance of 'third spaces' that enable communities to come together and initiate activities. These need to be supported by a tax and benefits system that ensures nobody goes without life's essentials. These are issues that cannot be addressed at a purely local level but are a prerequisite for successful local action.

PRINCIPLE 2: Support local initiative. Create the conditions for local flourishing by promoting self-organisation and mutual aid. This includes supporting and respecting local leaders; providing resources and freedom, as Big Local does, to allow communities to set their own agendas and meet local needs as they see fit; providing learning and networking opportunities; and making public services responsive to community needs through localisation and neighbourhood-based management rather than through centralisation and digitisation.

PRINCIPLE 3: Take the long view. Change is an evolutionary process, not a succession of projects. There are no fixes; local interventions should be thought of not as solutions to problems, but as ways of building and maintaining the capacity to respond to ever-evolving challenges. Trust and respect grow over time, but can be quickly destroyed by officials and politicians determined to see through short term visions for 'transformation'. Slow policy may be the best policy.

In the world of politics and policy, there is an almost irresistible temptation to devise and promote the next big idea. Government ministers need big ideas to show they are acting to address persistent problems, and as tasty morsels to feed to

hungry media. Think tanks and policy experts need big ideas to demonstrate that they have something new and interesting to contribute to the formulation of legislation and guidance. Local leaders need big ideas to provide a sense of substance to narratives of hope and change.

Big Local has shown the power of small actions and modest radicalism. Big Local neighbourhoods show that long-term investment and respectful support can go a long way. Neighbourhoods that are low on confidence need this kind of slow and sustained assistance. But they also need reliable, effective, consistent and responsive public services. Big Local can help identify the seeds beneath the snow, and can plant new ones. But local projects can't be expected to create a wider climate for germination.

Perhaps the most significant lesson of Big Local, particularly in the context of the last few decades of British public policy, is that we shouldn't underestimate the importance of well-tested and unsurprising ideas. Community initiatives have been beset by institutional amnesia and reinventing wheels. Sometimes we don't need new wheels: we just need to lubricate the ones we have and replace the tyres before they wear out.

"Big Local taps into a long history... That raises two questions. The first is how to make change stick, when so many initiatives of the past have come unstuck. The second is how to connect local change, often at a very small scale, with the wider changes required to end the perpetual cycle of renewal and decline in which the benefits, ultimately, appear to flow out of localities rather than into them."

Across England, 150 communities are using £1 million each to make their area a better place to live. They are part of Big Local, a resident-led programme of local transformation, described as 'perhaps the most important and ambitious experiment in community development ever undertaken in the UK'.

Julian Dobson reports on the aspirations and achievements of Big Local areas in Merseyside, Lincoln and Telford, and places them in the context of previous experiences of community development, decline and revitalisation. Providing comparison, he also reflects on the work of three other projects: the Peckham Health Centre, established more than 90 years ago, the Deighton and Brackenhall Initiative in Huddersfield, and Manor and Castle Development Trust in Sheffield.

This essay is one of a series exploring how people and places are changing through Big Local. Each essay considers the lessons of Big Local for institutions and policymakers interested in radical devolution of power and responsibility to a community level.

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