

The role of money in a place based programme

Communities in Control study Research summary #2

Overview

Previous place based initiatives have included varying degrees of financial investment into localities and community involvement in decision making.

Community approaches in public health and in other policy fields (e.g. participatory budgeting initiatives) also involve giving communities greater control over how resources (financial and otherwise) are used to improve the social, environmental, cultural and/or material conditions in which people live and work.

Under the place based programme Big Local, residents of 150 areas in England have been handed control over at least one million pounds to enable them to make a positive difference to their neighbourhoods.

As part of the Communities in Control study, the research investigated how funding has acted as a facilitator for local action, as well as the challenges associated with community decision making. Based on findings from the study's first phase, this summary highlights the main ways in which the funding worked as a mechanism for change during the programme's early stages.

“I think it’s (the million) enormously important... it gives some level of credibility to what we’re doing”

Engaging and connecting

The money worked to get people involved and interested at an early stage of the programme's roll out. Residents involved with the Big Local programme talked about the potential for real change and the hope that the funding offered for the local community.

The presence of the funding itself also enabled priority setting. As people took part in Big Local, it was necessary for those involved to discuss and gather ideas from the local community, as to how the money should be prioritised and used for the benefit of the area.

In some cases, tensions emerged. In localities where there had been successive waves of regeneration, there was sometimes cynicism about what was 'different' if previous programmes were perceived to have had little benefit for the community.

Relationships and power

Particularly at an early stage of roll out, some organisations and professionals were unclear about the amount of control that residents had over decisions about the million pounds.

In some cases, resident members of Big Local partnerships (with oversight of the million) expressed misgiving about the financial motivations underpinning why some public and community/voluntary sector agencies got involved with the programme.

This was particularly of concern in the context of public sector funding cuts.



“You’ve got to be cautious, and you’ve got to be accommodating. But you sometimes don’t want to be. But you have to work with people... We have had councilors attend meetings... it’s generally because they want to suggest where money could be used. And I always feel defensive straightaway.”

Having greater control over funding meant that residents felt they had more credibility and authority to participate in decision making forums with other agencies such as local authorities. In turn, this could open up opportunities for discussion about priorities for the local area or joint work/funding of local projects (e.g. a community park).

In this respect, funding helped to facilitate ‘a place at the table’ where the community had not been represented previously in decision making forums.

Money as a distraction

Another view expressed was that the money could detract attention from moving forward collectively with decisions and action. This was when conversations became focused only on making decisions about how the money should be spent. Those expressing this view believed it was also important to keep the focus on relationship building and widening participation.

As the Communities in Control summary #3 on social context explores, existing community tensions between residents and/or organisations, could also slow down, or challenge the process of decision making.



Using the money

The rate of spend was often slow in some areas, because residents felt very responsible for making best use of the funding.

In some cases there were concerns about how much funding should be used for running costs such as employing a worker.

Big Local areas were also considering strategies to make the money go further. This included an emphasis on social investment as well as actively seeking matched funding from other organisations.

International evidence review of ‘money’

During the research programme, a review was undertaken to investigate types of scenarios where the ‘community’ receives money (e.g. received for the purposes of economic, social, health, or other types of development). The aim was to explore how ‘community’ is conceptualised in relation to this process and the implications of this for health inequalities.

Reynolds, Joanna, et al. "Conceptualising the ‘community’ as a recipient of money – A critical literature review, and implications for health and inequalities." *Social Science & Medicine* 143 (2015): 88-97. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2015.08.049>

FURTHER INFORMATION

The Communities in Control study

The independent research is investigating the health and social impacts of Big Local and aims to draw out lessons for the development of future community initiatives.

Two preliminary phases (2014/17) were funded by NIHR School for Public Health Research and gathered evidence on the early implementation of Big Local and early health and social impacts.

Phase 3 is funded by the NIHR Public Health Research Programme. It builds on these earlier stages, to investigate longer-term health and social outcomes for individuals and local populations living in Big Local areas

About Big Local

Big Local is a Lottery funded place based programme rolled out in 150 areas in England over at least ten years, managed by Local Trust (www.localtrust.org.uk)

In each area, residents have control over decision making about how funding is used to address neighbourhood priorities, whether this relates to the environment, the economy, social relationships or area reputation. Big Local could improve health and wellbeing by empowering people to have more control over their lives and by improving the local determinants of health in these areas.

This is one in a series of summaries reporting findings from the research

1. How collective control is developing
2. The role of money
3. Social contexts
4. Spaces for participation
5. Improving area reputations
6. Newspaper coverage and Big Local

Graphic narratives of health inequalities and community action



Read this online booklet by the illustrator Joe Decie, inspired by residents in Big Local areas.

Visit the new website

Browse, read, watch and download resources from the study

www.communitiesincontrol.uk

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