Power Partnerships: learning from Cornwall

About the Power Partnerships action research project

The Commission on the Future of Localism was set up in 2017 to consider how to reinvigorate localism and strengthen community power. It was Chaired by Lord Kerslake and brought together politicians, policy experts and community leaders. We published the Commission’s findings in ‘People Power’ in 2018.

Over the past year, in partnership with Local Trust and Power to Change, we have been working on an action research project in four areas to test our findings and recommendations in practice. Through this project, we hope to show how local authorities can drive forward a radical new localism agenda.

We have been working with Cornwall, Stevenage, Southwark and Wigan. Our learning from working with Cornwall Council, town and parish councils and community organisations in Cornwall is summarised in this report. You can also read our full report with our findings from all four areas in ‘Power Partnerships’ online at locality.org.uk/power-partnerships.
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Summary of our findings in Cornwall

Cornwall offers significant learning for localism policy and practice. Localism within Cornwall is advanced, compared with other local authorities in England. This is partly due to the creation of a single unitary authority and dissolution of districts in 2009. This, combined with budgetary pressures, created a necessity for change. To date, 80% of the 213 town and parish (local councils) across the county have a service delivery agreement with Cornwall Council. Over 100 communities across Cornwall have seen assets transferred to local ownership. Cornwall Council also has a devolution deal with central government, the first deal to be agreed with a rural unitary authority. 1

Local councils are the key institutions for the devolution of powers, assets and services in Cornwall. Professor Jane Wills of Exeter University, who was also a commissioner for the Localism Commission, has carried out a research piece about the experience of local councils, as a contribution to our project. Wills finds there has been significant development in models of delivery, capacity and purpose of local councils. Local councils have ‘risen to challenge of localism’, with a mix of both reactive and proactive approaches to devolution. Case studies across Cornwall show the ambition from local councils to increase their strategic place-shaping role—from community-led housing, to economic regeneration. However, gaps remain for training and support for local councils, staff and councillors. There is also scope to strengthen their role in community development and their partnerships with VCSE organisations.

Across Cornwall there are powerful models of localism driven by communities and community organisations. Community asset ownership and management has leveraged additional community resources, social enterprise, and strengthened community engagement in local priorities. Our engagement throughout this project has highlighted more opportunities for community delivery, coproduction and community-led decision-making. These partnerships are key to maximising resources and mobilising capacity at a local level.

Devolution of services, assets and resources is not an end in itself. What matters most is localism’s potential to strengthen communities and improve peoples’ lives. Across Cornwall, communities and council stakeholders have spoken about mobilising community power to address some of the county’s most pressing social, economic and environmental challenges: from tackling the effects of neighbourhood poverty and revitalising local economic opportunities, to the climate emergency.
About our research activities

Our research involved a workshop with Cornwall Council’s localism team at the inception of the project to identify key themes. We carried out interviews with community organisations and infrastructure organisations. We explored the opportunities for community capacity and how community expertise, enterprise and power can flourish. This has included an in-depth case study of Par Bay Big Local, involving two roundtable discussions and interviews with community members and local stakeholders.

We interviewed six of Cornwall Council’s community link officers (CLOs) as part of our research project. We wanted to find out more about their purpose, role and responsibilities, as well as their perspectives on localism in Cornwall. As officers supporting how well localism functions on a day to day basis, as well as strategically, they provided very important insight for our research. This includes insight on how to develop trust and working relationships between different tiers of governance and services.

Professor Jane Wills of the University of Exeter has been conducting primary research on the experiences of town and parish councils (local councils) in asset transfer and devolution of services. She has also been exploring views on capacity and support requirements. This has included interviews with councillors and clerks from 11 TPCs. This research ‘A new geography of local government: the changing role of Town and Parish Councils in the UK’ has been published separately, and we draw upon the findings within this paper.

In May 2019, we held a workshop in Cornwall, hosted by Treverbyn Community Hall, which was an opportunity to bring together town and parish councils, community organisations and Cornwall Council officers. This event included a panel discussion on localism with Cllr. Hannaford, Cornwall Council Cabinet Member for Neighbourhoods, Sonia Clyne, Chair of Par Bay Big Local, Richard Williams, Cornwall Voluntary Sector Forum, and Sarah Mason, Cornwall Association of Local Councils.

A key part of the project has been to facilitate peer-learning with the other councils involved in the project. To support this, we held a roundtable in February 2019, hosted by Lord Kerslake (Chair of the Localism Commission), with councillors and senior council officers in Wigan, Cornwall and Stevenage. This was also an opportunity to explore how councils who are ambitious about community power could drive forward a radical new localism agenda.
Localism in Cornwall: changing culture and relationships.

Our Localism Commission heard about the fundamental role that changes in local authority relationships, culture and ways of working can have in enabling the power of community to flourish.

Councils who embrace community expertise and cultivate capacity within communities can reset the ‘power balance’ between citizen and state. This can unlock major benefits in terms of the civic participation which comes from ‘letting go’ and seeing community-led ventures flourish. Supportive relationships from the local authority are fundamental to removing barriers, facilitating opportunities, and celebrating success to inspire others.

In Cornwall, localism over the last decade has required significant culture and behavioural changes to embed localism internally and build appetite and vision at a local level. As Cornwall Council reflected in their original response to the Localism Commission call for evidence:

“The pace at which local councils (as well as Cornwall Council) change how they operate may appear relatively slow but is about organisational culture change at all levels and this takes time and the need to build mutual trust”.iii – Cornwall Council.

Internal culture change

Localism and devolution are championed at both a senior strategic and political level in Cornwall and are a core part of the Council’s corporate plan. A new devolution framework in 2014iv accelerated the pace and scale of devolution projects and opportunities for local areas. This has required significant internal management and resources to support the associated legal, technical and governance work, coordinated by the Council’s localism team.

The original drivers of localism in Cornwall were heavily influenced by austerity, financial pressures and the need to secure local provision. However, in recent years a key ambition from Cornwall Council has been to reinvigorate the empowerment narrative of localism.

The Council’s 2016 localism strategy includes a set of principles to guide community collaboration and localism. These included empowering local solutions, embracing community differences, and subsidiarity of decision-making.v As part of our research, we were interested in exploring the experience of
embedding localism as a way of working across the council. We wanted to understand how the vision for localism in Cornwall has been cascaded in practice.

We interviewed six of the community link officers (CLOs). These members of the localism team work ‘horizontally’ across different services and teams. As internal champions of localism they can also tackle practical barriers and broker opportunities with other teams, councillors and local councils. In interviews with CLOs, we explored some of the challenges they face in influencing colleagues in other departments or services. Some reflected that localism can still be viewed as a siloed responsibility of one team, rather than embedded across the local authority.

“Localism needs to be seen as not just something the localism team does... It needs to be a core behaviour and attitude of the authority to ‘think’ community.” – Community Link Officer.

CLO interviewees also reflected on the constraints facing other departments and services, which means officers do not always have the permission or freedom to innovate or work differently with communities. Localism is about championing community benefit and local priorities. Yet the pressures currently on services and budgets mean that this social value is not always weighted highly enough against value for money.

“When transferring an asset to community group, sometimes all they can see is impact on budget line – when actually there are really clear benefits to the community. But individual service heads aren’t always given the confidence that they are not going to get penalised for loss of income.” – Cornwall Council officer.

“I empathise, as that tier are responsible for budget lines...If we’re devolving assets that are taking away their income...this is what they are going to get challenged on. It might bring savings to the council overall – but their service is losing out, and they haven’t got a ‘get out of jail’ from CEO and head of finance.” – Cornwall Council officer.

However, despite the challenges of silos, we also heard about recent improvements in how localism is valued and understood across Cornwall Council. Senior leaders driving cooperation between Directors to support more place-based working has been key. This has resulted in greater understanding of the objectives for localism, and a shared awareness of incentives and pressures for different departments.
Directors across the council have also been more explicit on the importance of working with CLOs and welcome the external challenge and local intelligence which the localism team bring. One officer described the CLO role as “getting under the skin of communities”, understanding the subtleties of local issues, and how these impact priorities in local policy making and strategy.

**Relationships between tiers of governance**

The importance of trusting relationships with communities and town and parish councils is critical to the success of the council’s devolution programme. Cultivating these relationships and strengthening communication is vital, particularly in the context of a large unitary authority with a dispersed rural population. As one CLO described, parish and town councils and communities sometimes still perceive Cornwall Council as a “monolithic organisation”. Levers of power can be viewed as remote and inaccessible. The council’s corporate plan also identifies better communication with residents as a core priority. It recognises that local people are not always as well-informed or able to influence decision-making as they should be.

Jane Will’s research highlights some frictions in working relationships between parishes and County Hall. Negotiations over asset transfers, service agreement and budgets have sometimes been protracted, testing the relationships between the two tiers of governance to make localism a success. The research has highlighted some remaining challenges in transitioning from ‘top-down’ formula for devolution, to a ‘bottom up’ and partnership-based approach with local councils.\(^{vi}\)

The localism team have a key role in building connections between Cornwall Council officers, elected members and local councils. They act as a link between different tiers of governance and bring together multiple perspectives. CLOs described that they can sometimes be perceived as quasi-external to the rest of the council. This means they can be both a key point of contact locally as well as a bridge to broker potential relational challenges. The ability to act quickly, to facilitate or address problems, and interpret strategies or decisions from Cornwall Council, was considered essential by interviewees. However, there are recognised gaps with VCSE organisation relationships. This was also reflected by VCSE interviewees, who felt there was a greater role for partnership with the localism team.
Community participation and delivery

Cornwall has a long history of community activism and volunteering. The county has some of the highest volunteering rates in the country – with 1 in 3 people in Cornwall volunteering. There is therefore a huge “people power” resource and Cornwall’s localism strategy has also sought to harness this. One such initiative is the ‘Community Chest’ fund, where councillors are given £2,000 each to spend and allocate to community projects. As well as the financial investment, this scheme is also part of celebrating community action and showcasing what’s possible when communities take the lead.

Cornwall’s VCSE sector is a key partner within the localism landscape, strengthening communities and building local power. For example, while the majority of community asset transfers (CAT) have been with local councils, there are powerful examples of ownership and delivery by community groups. South Kerrier Alliance CIC is one example– a community-led regeneration project in Helston with a multiple asset transfer from the council including a skate park, play park, lake and car park. The council’s CAT policy still prefers freehold transfer to local councils; however, senior leaders have actively championed the additional innovation and community expertise that can be achieved from community group ownership.

Community development activities delivered by VCSE organisations are also key to strengthening voice, participation and local power. One example is Cornwall Voluntary Sector Forum’s (CVSF) ‘Shaping My Community’ programme. This is a series of local workshops, run in partnership with local organisations, to strengthen social action and grassroots initiatives. These workshops are aimed at bringing together community members to discuss local priorities, identify local strengths and solutions, and develop grassroots leadership. The purpose of the programme is to build power within the community to establish agendas and take ideas forward. The aim is that by providing the initial facilitation and capacity, new resident-led activity and social action projects will flourish.

Case study: Treverbyn Community Hall

Located between the villages of Stenalees and Penwithick, in central Cornwall, Treverbyn Community Hall is a thriving community hub – with a community café, library, event space and community garden.

The building was originally a Church hall; however, by 2013, with little money to maintain it, it was in a spiral of decline. The area had also lost its local shop, including post office, and there were few places left for community activity and interaction. The vicar was trying to drive community interest to take over the
management of the Hall, in conversation with Cornwall Council, but efforts and plans were leading nowhere.

Sara Marsh, now centre manger at the Hall, describes how she became involved in the future of the Hall. The stretch of land next to the Hall was unmaintained and overgrown and she had the idea for a community garden. The plan quickly attracted neighbours to volunteer and the community garden took off. It was something that people could get stuck into and had a visual impact so people could see the change they were making.

“Working on the community garden project, people kept saying how it was such a shame that the Hall wasn’t being used. Eventually we said ‘if you want to change something, you’ve got to get involved – so let’s go to a trustee meeting of the Hall and see if we can help.’” – Sara Marsh, Manager at the Hall.

This led to a number of the volunteers from the community garden being co-opted into the Hall Committee. Injecting more action into the project, the Committee applied to Sita Cornwall Trust for a £250k capital grant, to use for renovations, an extension and new heating. Receiving the grant was a “game changer” as they were able to extend the building, create a multi-use space, and create possibilities for more activities and income generation.

Today, the Hall is nearly entirely self-funding; they have office tenants, including the parish council, and they are a key venue for hire for meetings, events and activities. They have over 24,000 visits per year, with 80% of these coming from within a five-mile radius. With a small team of two staff, there are 55 volunteers from the surrounding communities. Future plans for the Hall include, a community transport scheme, to address the failures in local public transport, and options for a community-led social housing scheme, to provide affordable rented local housing.

The story of Treverbyn Community Hall - from a dilapidated, unused and empty hall, to a thriving community hub with ambitious plans for the future - demonstrates the immense power that exists within communities. What is required is the spark to ignite that power. In this case, the community garden project was the catalyst for the more ambitious task of taking on the Hall - bringing together neighbours as volunteers, creating the connections, ideas and eventually the community spirit to say: “we can do this.”
Case study: Par Bay Big Local

Par Bay Big Local (PBBL) was established in 2010 to support the communities of Par, St Blazey and Tywardreath. As part of the national Big Local programme, they have an endowment of approx. £1 million to spend in their neighbourhood over ten years. We interviewed some of their key community partners, as part of our project, to find out more about their Big Local journey, their challenges and their impact in the local area.

Since 2012, Par Bay Big Local have funded over 75 different projects and activities in the area, growing local capacity by investing in and supporting neighbourhood groups and community networks. They have used participatory budgeting as part of their grant-giving activities. A key purpose of this was to get people networking and thinking about the complementary interests and priorities in the community, and how community action can be mobilised to address these priorities.

One of the projects they’ve supported through seed-funding is the Roundhouse initiative. The initiative is seeking to transform the old railway infrastructure in Par (including the engine and turntable) into a skills and enterprise centre for young people to learn engineering and construction skills. At the core of this project is the aspiration to use the area’s industrial heritage creatively to generate opportunities for younger generations. The initial support from Big Local has unlocked further opportunities and investment, including a partnership with Shared Assets to develop the next phases for the project.

We also heard from Carol Fitzpatrick at Kernow Youth and Fourways Youth Centre in St Blazey, about the impact that Par Bay Big Local have had in supporting young people in the community. They have directly invested in youth work in the community and have sought to strengthen youth voice in community activities. This has included funding for ‘Young Advisors’ and a participatory research project, run by Kernow Youth, to find out more about young peoples’ aspirations for the area. This is a demonstration of PBBL’s commitment to ensuring all parts of the community are represented and have a say in the priorities for the neighbourhood. The Young Advisors have also supported the development of Par’s Neighbourhood Plan.

Par Bay Big Local’s major legacy is the Cornubia Centre, the former dance hall based in the centre of Par. It was purchased and renovated by PBBL to develop a creative and enterprise hub within the community. With two large halls, meeting rooms, retail units and informal meeting spaces, it is a thriving venue for hire for
local community events from craft classes to Yoga. There are also two small shops, selling products made by local artists as well as an environmentally friendly paint shop, using recycled and reused materials. Through a partnership with Reed recruitment agency and Ocean Housing, Par Bay Big Local also run a job club and IT centre from the Cornubia Centre.

Throughout our interviews with key stakeholders – the importance of “community confidence” came up time and again. Par Bay Big Local, and the tenacious commitment of the partnership members, are “making stuff happen” in a very powerful way. This has had a ripple effect throughout the community, strengthening community activity and building on the key assets of the area.

Par has become a beacon of what can be achieved through community enterprise and collective action. For example, in 2017 when the community’s all-weather outdoor running track and pavilion looked like it might close, a group of local people stepped in to save it. Par Track CIC now have a 125-year lease and have maintained the track as a community-run sports facility. They have also recently secured the future of the local library service by taking it on from the council.

Community accountability and engagement – the role of local councils

“As a community there is loads of capacity – people with great skills, but they are not used well yet. The parish could have a key role in enabling others to participate, to strengthen their own capacity through delegation and sharing responsibility with others. It’s about empowering and letting go.” – Community activist.

A key theme throughout our research is the stronger role for parish and town councils in community development and as catalysts for community activity.

Local councils are key institutions of localism. Cornwall’s devolution framework has resulted in significant capacity development in town and parish councils, as they have taken on increasing responsibilities and budgets. Responding to the new complexities required in their role has transformed the capabilities, size and functions of many, particularly medium and large, local councils. With this growth comes a renewed imperative to focus on the community engagement and accountability of local councils.

Our local workshop brought together community organisations, local councils and Cornwall Council staff across Cornwall. A key area of discussion was the importance of strengthening community relationships and the opportunities for
community groups, residents and local councils to work together on shared challenges and priorities. While there are some very productive examples of partnership between local councils and VCSE organisations, there is greater potential to unlock this within Cornwall.

For parish and town councils, key barriers highlighted concerned the time and resources that ‘good’ community engagement requires. Yet, community engagement is also vital for town and parish councils in maintaining trust, effectiveness and accountability. The democratic stamp of local elections is ineffective if it is not accompanied by genuine, ongoing and meaningful community engagement.

There can be a presumption in attitudes to community engagement of waiting for the “community to come to us” or a reliance on transactional engagement and information sharing. Instead, local councils should be seeking more powerful relationships based on proactive networks and connections, and participatory routes for involvement in local decision making.

A key opportunity for some local councils is in making better use of community networks and spaces, informal groups and activities. This would create new opportunities for community engagement and partnership – and broaden participation to find “new voices” within the community. Community trusts and local organisations also play a key role in strengthening these voices, encouraging new leadership and stimulating social action.

Some of the community organisations we spoke to highlighted the role of the local councils as vital in strengthening strategic links with the unitary authority and supporting community-led ventures. However, other VCSE interviewees spoke of frustration of local councils not engaging with community projects or lack of willingness to engage in more participatory democracy. For example, one interviewee described this disconnect between the potential role of local institutions and community action:

“When the community comes together to drive something forward in a deprived community, they should be supportive and proud of it. But I sometimes think what [our project] has done has been despite of the parish council.” – Community activist.

The governance of localism – powers and decision making at a local level.

Cornwall is divided into 19 Community Networks in order to support localism and provide local areas with more control over shaping local services and strategies. Each area has a Community Network Panel – made up of town and parish
councils – to drive forward local agendas and bring together partnerships around shared concerns. A key example is their responsibility for a devolved highways budget for local highways improvements. They also lead key strategic relationships – for example shaping local economic development through relationship with the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) or tackling key issues in health and social care provision by working with providers and commissioners.

This structure provides an important framework for localism in Cornwall. It has been highlighted as best practice by the national Civil Society Strategy for its culture of collaboration and partnership. Having a structure in place that can drive forward locality working and provide governance for further devolved responsibilities and strategies is a significant benefit of this approach.

Each Community Network is supported by a CLO from Cornwall Council’s localism team. CLO interviewees reflected that a key function of the Panels is about developing the right partnerships required for “getting things done” locally. By combining a number of different parishes, this provides opportunities for joint learning, understanding and sharing of resources. Additionally, they provide a useful “sounding board” for Cornwall Council and a local understanding of implications of policy and decision-making that might not otherwise be there.

We have also explored some of the challenges raised about how the Community Network Panels are currently constituted and what some of the opportunities for strengthening them are in the future.

In interviews with local councillors and clerks in 11 councils, Jane Wills reports that one of the key challenges expressed about the Community Network Panels was their geography. This challenge highlights how important geographical identity can be to localism. Whether boundaries resonate with people’s understanding of what “local” is matters to local decision-making and governance. This goes beyond technical distinctions, and relates to deep cultural, industrial, historical and geographical identities. A further concern identified through interviews with local councils was the implications of competition between local areas over devolved budgets, if the form and function of decision-making through the Community Network Panels is not well-designed.

CLOs also reflected some of the limitations of Community Network Panels in engagement with community organisations and residents. While civil society organisations are sometimes invited in as a partner or speaker at these events, alongside business networks or service providers, it is recognised that Community Network Panels are predominately “dominated by politicians, councillors”. Others reflected that the venues (council settings such as town halls) and at times “hierarchical” format of the meetings, can be a perceived barrier to
community groups or residents. As one interviewee reflected, while these forums are the “natural environment” for politicians, “it doesn’t make general members of the public feel like it is necessarily something for them to be involved in.”

Youth engagement was highlighted as a particular gap. Interviewees reflected on opportunities for closer working with schools and youth organisations, to bring these voices into Community Network Panels. New forms of engagement are currently being explored by the council. These should be co-designed with VCSE sectors and youth sectors as well as community groups, in order to develop a model of engagement that can be broader and more inclusive of youth voices.

These challenges were echoed by some of our VCSE sector interviewees. Community Networks and panel meetings were seen to be “council-led” and not necessarily a forum for engaging other community partners and residents. There was appetite for broadening engagement and using these structures for developing more strategic links between the VCSE sector and the localism agenda in Cornwall.
Reflections on the future of localism in Cornwall

Throughout our research, workshops and engagement with key stakeholders in Cornwall, we have discussed what changes are needed for the future of localism in the county. Key reflections include:

**Embedding localism further within Cornwall Council’s strategy:** This could include a framework for localism which is operationalised as KPIs across council departments. Measures could include: accounting for social value and community benefit; co-ordinating services at a neighbourhood level; improvement in community engagement and involvement; opportunities for community ownership or community delivery in implementation. This framework could also be adapted and adopted by local councils and be co-designed in partnership with local councils, VCSE organisations and communities.

There is also greater potential around overlap and skills sharing between local councils and VCSE organisations and developing capacity in the organised community sector as part of localism strategy. Partnership with local infrastructure organisations are key to unlocking this transfer of learning.

**Strengthening community engagement in local institutions:** Local councils have a key role in the culture change needed to reset the power balance with communities, unlocking greater community activity and participation. Our research found varied experience of the effectiveness and extent of community development and community engagement by local councils. In some areas, barriers remain in behaviours but also leadership and resources at this level of governance which impedes the potential of greater localism through community involvement and action.

Community development resources can be limited for local councils. Strengthening a county wide resource of support could therefore increase opportunities for town and parish councils in local organising and community engagement. For example, learning from the NALC Community Organiser partnership which is embedding community organising into local democracy⁶. Local councils can also strengthen their outreach role through existing local relationships, broadening venues for meetings, improved digital networks, and asset mapping of local spaces, community groups and associations. Local councils require a mix of new resources and training/peer learning around community development.
Embedding more opportunities for community-led plans and engagement in the future of Community Networks: Community Networks provide an important structure for further devolved powers over strategy, decision-making, and budgets.

There could be merit in trialling community budgeting within another major service (learning lessons from the Highways project). However, the future role of Community Networks needs to include a more meaningful partnership with VCSE organisations and residents. Governance should include non-council community representation and greater expertise in community engagement and fostering participatory organisational culture.
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7. Ibid


11. NALC and Community Organiser partnership, more information available at: https://www.corganisers.org.uk/news-blog/partnership-nalc/