Power Partnerships: learning from Wigan

About the Power Partnerships 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 Wigan Council and community organisations in Wigan 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 findings in Wigan

A key conclusion from the Localism Commission was the importance of local authority culture, behaviours and relationships in enabling localism and community power to flourish. In Wigan, the ‘Wigan Deal’ has focused on a new social contract with residents, mobilising the capacity of communities and local partnerships to improve the borough. Through our project we wanted to explore how the Wigan Deal has sought to reframe the power balance between citizen and state, and the opportunities for localism within the borough.

There is significant learning for other local authorities. In particular, the programme of staff engagement that has supported the Wigan Deal offers important insight for how to embed the culture change required for localism. Leadership and strategic commitment are vital – but organisational change in practice needs staff at all levels to be empowered to take ownership of the vision for localism. The Deal has also required a comprehensive programme for strengthening communities in order to deliver social outcomes, reduce demand through greater local resilience, and stimulate the local provider market. This has included funding, asset transfer, and infrastructure support.

Given the council’s strong support for strengthening community capacity and partnership, there are significant opportunities in Wigan for community governance and the transfer of powers and decision-making to a local level.

About our research activities

Our research involved: a workshop with Wigan Council at the inception of the project to identify key themes; and interviews with community organisations, infrastructure organisations, council staff and councillors. We also carried out an in-depth case study with Leigh Neighbours, the Big Local partnership in Leigh West, including a roundtable discussion and interviews with community members in Leigh. In May 2019, we held a workshop at Sunshine House Community Centre, with participants from the council and community organisations. This was an opportunity to share our key findings and discuss future opportunities for community power in Wigan.

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.
The Wigan Deal

“At its heart the Deal is about empowering communities and enabling them to do what they do best. It has meant finding out what is important to our citizens, what truly makes them happy, and focusing on their strengths and talents.” Cllr. Molyneux, Leader of Wigan Council, Wigan Deal 2030.

The Wigan Deal has been described as a “blueprint for British local government and beyond” and has received awards for its leadership in community engagement, public service reform and asset-based working.iii Forged in 2011 in the early days of austerity, when Wigan were facing some of the deepest cuts in local government.iii The Wigan Deal is an agreement between the council, businesses and communities to work in partnership to create a better borough. Through this approach, they have managed to create efficiencies at the same time as freezing council tax and improving key services.iv

The Wigan Deal encompasses a number of separate strategies – including deals for communities, adult social care, children and young people, health and wellness and businesses. The Deal for Communities is designed to support residents to do more by growing community capacity and strengthening the VCSE sector. This includes a Community Investment Fund, which has put £10million into community initiatives over the last six years. It also includes a programme of Community Asset Transfer (CAT) supporting communities to take over council owned buildings and land.

At the core of the Wigan Deal are a set of key workforce behaviours – ‘BeWigan Behaviours’ – which have been a core part of embedding the culture change required from the Deal. As the former CEO of Wigan Council, Donna Hall, describes: “[The Deal] wasn’t an awakening as such, but an iterative coming together...The Wigan Deal is about our DNA – not a separate programme but a way of working.”v Making sure this way of working is operationalised has meant the BeWigan behaviours are a core part of internal HR strategies, from recruitment, to training and staff development.

The Wigan Deal 2030 was finalised this year as the council’s strategy for the borough over the coming decade. It was shaped through a public consultation exercise, ‘The Big Listening Project’. This included a big green sofa touring public places in the borough, with council staff having conversations with residents about their views, as well as public meetings, community workshops and online surveys.
What can we learn about ‘culture change’ from the Wigan Deal?

Our Localism Commission findings emphasised that for localism to thrive, a supportive council culture is essential. This often requires resetting behaviours and relationships between communities and local authorities. 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 increased civic participation, community resilience and innovation which comes from ‘letting go’ and enabling community-led ventures and social action to flourish.

The Wigan Deal has sought to reframe rights and responsibilities in a new social contract between the council and residents. There is important learning within Wigan about the culture change that has been required within this reframing. As with any major public sector transformation which requires a shift of power as well as resources, there were teething problems and challenges in the initial rolling out of the Wigan Deal. Through our research, we wanted to capture some of the processes and approaches that had helped to embed new ways of working and cultures of engagement and participation across the borough.

Political and strategic leadership have been central to the Wigan Deal. Both the then leader Lord Peter Smith and former CEO Donna Hall were prepared to take a long-term vision to reform the authority’s delivery model. However, alongside this top-level leadership, the Deal has required a programme of staff engagement in the new vision. This has been essential to shift behaviours in practice and build the trust and partnership that sits at the heart of the Deal approach.

Staff across council services were required to work in an asset-based way. This involves a shift from ‘doing to’ to ‘doing with’ and focusing of people’s strengths, aspirations and capabilities. As former CEO Donna Hall has said “some of our staff were quite nervous about working in this different way – if they don’t have a clipboard separating them and a resident, they can feel a bit lost. We part company with people who don’t want to work in this system and help them get another job.” The latest staff survey shows that 96% of staff understand the Deal and the difference it had made – a testament of how embedded the Deal is within the workforce. Evaluations of Wigan’s approach, including a Local Government Association Peer Review (2017) highlights the successes of staff engagement in the Deal values and behaviours.
Staff engagement in the Wigan Deal

We heard how the Deal has involved a clear and simple narrative which speaks to staff motivations and behaviours. The BeWigan Behaviours (Be positive; Be accountable; Be courageous) are incorporated throughout HR processes, including recruitment, appraisal and management approaches.

Engaging staff in this vision included a walk-through ‘BeWigan Experience’, rolled out with the launch of the Deal for the Future strategy. This was an interactive experience, installed in a council building, to bring the Deal story to life in a creative way for staff from all teams (including remote workers). The experience involved moving through different time-zones, from 2010 up to 2020, and taking part in a board game and quiz with other staff members. Attendees were also encouraged to reflect on what they would do differently in their jobs as a result of their experience. The experience reached over 90% of staff, with 95% rating it as good or excellent. An estimated £100,000 was saved in providing the BeWigan installation, compared to the costs of group training courses.iii

As part of our research, we also observed a condensed version of the “Deal for your Street” interactive experience for environmental services teams (such as street cleaning and rubbish collection). This experience demonstrated how operational staff in these teams are also engaged in the Deal behaviours and use their interactions with residents to be part of an asset-based approach. We also observed a bitesize training session on asset-based approaches for social services staff. This demonstrated the consistency of embedding asset-based approaches into all interactions, conversations and ways of working with residents.

Council staff also have two days volunteering leave each year to spend with VCSE organisations. This approach is used to create connections between communities and the council which can develop longer term relationships, skills sharing and support.

Throughout our interviews, empowering leadership was identified as a vital part of culture change. Providing staff with the permission to innovate has been really important, giving staff freedom to ‘take a punt’ on community approaches and knowing they will be backed-up in their decisions. For example, this flexibility is also part of community funding decisions, recognising that not all projects will succeed. This means that early risks can be taken and staff can work with communities to build community activity from the grassroots.
Community engagement approaches

“The Deal and the Localism Act have a lot in common – as I see it, both are a pact to say to voluntary groups and residents, if you do more, you will get the support you need. Both are about coming together to have more say in how our community goes forward.” Trustee, community organisation.

The Deal has required residents being asked to “do more” – from recycling, to volunteering, and taking on ownership of local services and amenities. We heard how there have been some challenges with this – some seeing it as the council neglecting its responsibilities or as a smokescreen for cuts. Yet, overall satisfaction from residents is high, and has improved consistently throughout the Deal years.\(^x\)

The council’s approach to community engagement has also been cited as part of shifting that culture change. For example, they took an open forum “Have your say” approach to public meetings and consultations around the Wigan Deal. This involved the Leader and CEO of the council answering questions in a series of public events across the borough. We heard from council and community participants about the value of “honest, open and non-defensive” engagement in such events, developing the partnership-based behaviours of the Deal. In understanding council limitations and pressures, the community responsibility to take-action and ownership within their local area is better understood too.

‘Believe in Leigh’ was also established by the council as an engagement campaign to ensure that Leigh residents have a strong role in influencing the Wigan Deal 2030. Some of our interviewees in Leigh highlighted that council communication and messaging can feel very “led by Wigan”, reinforcing the sense of Leigh as on the periphery of the borough. Therefore, the engagement through the Believe in Leigh campaign, was considered an important part of making sure the Deal was genuinely inclusive of all parts of the borough. This included a survey campaign, using the results to inform the priorities for a £4m investment in Leigh – which focused on town centre improvements and tackling anti-social behaviour.\(^x\)

Breaking away from a well-established ‘parent/child’ narrative between councils and residents, requires celebrating and championing what’s possible when communities take the lead. It also requires breaking down practical barriers which stand in the way of community action. An example of this is Wigan Council’s partnership with Incredible Edible, the movement creating edible gardens in “unloved” places. They have wanted to demonstrate the community
doesn’t need to “ask permission” from highways and planning departments to make positive changes to their local areas. If they want to clear a space and do something with it, they should feel they can “just get on and do it”.

A strong VCSE sector has also been a key part of enabling this culture change. One community sector interviewee described how the enabling approach from the council has only been possible with support from a strong, independent VCSE sector: “communities feel more able in getting on and doing things, unfettered by having to ask permission.” Another interviewee reflected on a “strong sense of civic entrepreneurship” across the borough which has played a key part in developing community activity:

“Civic entrepreneurs are setting an example in terms of creating change, setting up projects and speaking up. Wigan as a place has been influenced by this kind of thinking, often independently rather than through institutions.” Social enterprise, manager.

Building community capacity

Community capacity is one of the core domains for strengthening local power, as outlined by the Localism Commission. For localism to thrive, there must be the capacity within communities to drive forward community initiatives. ‘People power’ is an extraordinary resource, but it can sometimes be lying latent in communities and require a catalyst to unlock it.

Wigan’s approach strongly emphasises building community capacity. Despite the necessity of financial cuts, the Wigan Deal involved an increase in funding for voluntary and community organisations. The Council recognised that an ‘invest to save’ approach was required to strengthen the role these organisations have in prevention and community resilience.

The Community Investment Fund

The Community Investment Fund (CIF) has put £10 million into community and voluntary sector organisations in the borough. Investments through CIF have been designed to nurture, develop and strengthen community projects. From small, grassroots initiatives, such as a community café designed to improve health and tackle loneliness, to larger investment, such as a new branch of Unify Credit Union. Council cost-benefit analysis calculates that for every £1 spent through the fund, £2 fiscal values is created. This includes direct savings to social care, crisis services and benefits payments.¹¹
We heard how the CIF is deliberately branded as an ‘investment’ and not a grant. The intention is that initial funding should lead to longer-term sustainability and additional social impact returns for the community. Applications are required to demonstrate long term potential for sustainability, including income generation or future contract readiness. The CIF will cover 80% of costs of community projects, with a requirement for a 20% community match fund. This community match does not have to be cash; it could be volunteer time or donated materials or equipment. The purpose of the match is to show that there is genuine community commitment to the initiative.\footnote{33}

There is recognition from the council that sustainability might be difficult to achieve for some community projects, particularly those working to support complex social problems. Flexibility is built into the fund, and additional business planning support is available for groups to develop longer term plans. Through the Wigan Borough Community Partnership (the VCSE infrastructure body) CIF recipients are also connected into a wider network of support, training and advice.

We heard from council officers that the risk of potential failure within projects supported by the CIF is recognised by senior leaders. Permission to take these risks anyway means that staff are able to work with communities in a more innovative way and ‘take a punt’ on projects that have community support. This approach pays dividends; only two projects over the course of the programme have folded.

All fund recipients are expected to understand and adopt the Wigan Deal values and behaviours, and therefore through the CIF the council is also strengthening the visibility and brand of the Wigan Deal.

**Case study: Abram Ward Community Cooperative**

The case study of Abram Ward Community Cooperative exemplifies the powerful impact that occurs when council support, community expertise, and opportunities through localism align.

Abram Ward Community Cooperative (AWCC) was set up in 2013 to provide community-based services to the residents of Abram Ward. They took ownership of the Platt Bridge Community Zone in 2014, on an asset transfer from the Council. They have since transformed it into a thriving hub for social enterprise and community activity. They run a range of projects, from ‘Men’s Sheds’ which supports isolated individuals to take up wood and metal working, to their digital programme supporting IT skills and connectivity for residents.
AWCC established a neighbourhood forum ‘Abram Ward Communities Together’ in 2015 to develop a neighbourhood plan. They have worked with the community to develop a bottom-up strategy for housing, health and the local economy based on resident priorities. Through the Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government ‘Our Place’ programme, AWCC also led the development of the Wigan Borough Social Enterprise Network.

As part of Wigan Council’s Community Investment Fund ‘Big Ideas’ programme, AWCC received £112,151 to strengthen their work with social enterprises across the borough. AWCC are now the incubator hub for Power to Change’s Empowering Places Fund, which has enabled them to take their ambitious plans for local wealth building even further.

The Power to Change investment has enabled AWCC to establish ‘Made in Wigan.’ This initiative is supporting people, many of whom have been isolated, to develop new skills, or share existing skills with others and establish new community businesses. AWCC and associated community businesses provide support, mentoring and access to professional services.

The ‘Made in Wigan’ brand is communicating the value of buying local to residents and local businesses across the borough. They recently opened a shop in the Galleries shopping centre in Wigan showcasing community business products and providing a platform for residents to drop in for support.

**Community Asset Transfer (CAT)**

Community asset transfer (CAT) also plays a key role in strengthening community capacity and localism in Wigan.

In Locality’s experience, having an updated CAT policy is crucial to ensuring that asset transfer is used strategically by local authorities to strengthen local communities. Wigan’s CAT policy was updated in 2016. It reflects the role that CAT can play in strengthening partnership working between sectors and empowering communities, as well as in supporting a more sustainable VCSE sector.

Wigan also exemplifies a number of other elements of an effective approach to CAT. Surplus assets which are considered available for CAT are published on the council’s website alongside a transparent Expression of Interest (EOI) process. This pipeline of available assets is reviewed by a team made up of multiple services within the council. This helps to ensure a whole-system view on the potential of CAT.
Council interviewees told us that while the original drivers for CAT were primarily focused on securing local services, it is has become a more proactive tool for developing local power and social value. The process of asset transfer is also supported by an infrastructure ecosystem, including Douglas Valley Community (a support organisation for VCSEs taking on community assets) and the Wigan Borough Community Partnership.

Our workshop also highlighted the appetite for greater asset ownership and management options, including meanwhile use and short leases, as part of local economic development. ‘Meanwhile use’ can allow communities to bring empty buildings into immediate community use, for the short-term, but do not provide any rights to ongoing tenure. The balance of power ultimately remains with the freeholder. Yet, such options can be a valuable part of the pathway to community ownership. Meanwhile use can play a vital role in revitalising assets, bringing empty buildings to life, and stimulating local enterprise ideas or community activities.

The Wigan Borough Community Partnership

The Wigan Borough Community Partnership (WBCP) has played a key role in strengthening the capacity of the VCSE sector, as well as in amplifying the voice of communities through a networked approach across the borough.

Founded in 2017 by local community organisations, the WBCP is a registered charity. It was established to provide support across the borough following the closure of Wigan CVS. It was supported by the council who provided funding for two staff salaries. We heard from founders and current staff that the key aim in establishing WBCP was to be sector-led and to be responsive to the changing capacity needs of VCSE organisations across the borough.

Stef Duerden, partnership manager at WBCP, described their approach in fostering collaborative working between communities and the council. An agile working system means that as well as working from their base at the LEIGHway centre, staff will often hot desk with other community members across the borough. Council officers in the Deal for Communities team will do likewise, as a way of breaking down organisational barriers and building trust in relationships. Stef describes how the Deal behaviours, which WBCP have also adopted, are pivotal to fostering genuine relationships and breaking down some of the hierarchies that sometimes disrupt partnership working.

The ‘Community Book’ developed by WBCP, is a key part of their strategy to strengthen volunteering opportunities and community activity across the borough. The Community Book is a digital database of community organisations,
spaces, facilities and activities across the borough. We heard how this model can also be used to strengthen relationships with businesses, by brokering opportunities for local businesses wanting to support their local community sector. Its potential for commissioning, for example for social prescribing referrals, is also being explored.

**The role of community sector in commissioning and procurement**

In our workshop discussion we explored some of the experiences of VCSE organisations in commissioning and procurement within the borough. For example, one participant highlighted that “sometimes there is a mismatch between what we hear in the Deal team and what we hear in the procurement team.” While attendees felt that the top-level strategy was supportive of the role the sector can play in service delivery, practical barriers still exist. For example, participants highlighted challenges in referral flows for social care services. Cuts to funding for non-statutory services have also put a strain on VCSE organisations seeking to deliver for their communities in a context of budget cuts.

Participants at the workshop highlighted opportunities for greater use of social value within procurement teams. Upcoming work between Wigan Council and SEUK on becoming a social enterprise place was also identified as an opportunity for increasing percentage procurement spend within the local economy.

Other participants pointed out that one of the consequences of the successful Community Investment Fund has meant there is a stronger community sector, and therefore a more competitive commissioning environment. In this context, there is a strategic gap for the sector around collaboration, consortia and other partnership models.
Community power and local governance

Our Localism Commission found that localism requires strong neighbourhood institutions for power to ‘stick’ at a local level. Healthy local governance is needed to ensure residents and local organisations have a stronger voice and tangible routes for achieving change. Community ownership of local assets and resources can also strengthen people’s opportunities to shape the places where they live and work.

Wigan Metropolitan Borough is geographically the largest in Greater Manchester. It is characterised by many towns and villages with distinct histories, cultures and local pride and identity. Until 2011, Wigan had 10 township forums which were a core part of their localism model. They were led by elected members and provided a model for local service coordination within the local strategic partnership. Wigan has two parish councils, Haigh and Shevington, but is predominantly an unparished borough. There are also three neighbourhood forums, set-up to create neighbourhood plans. Tenant associations also provide residents in council housing with a formal role within council decision-making, through tenant representatives.

Since township forums were restructured in 2011, the council have described their approach to localism as more ‘bottom-up’. They have emphasised the role of developing capacity rather than structures. Through our project, we wanted to explore the experiences of community-led governance in Wigan and the transfer of power and decision-making to communities.

Neighbourhood planning

Participants at our local workshop identified the advantages for neighbourhood planning in terms of harnessing a proactive energy from communities. As participants reflected, neighbourhood planning can provide a constructive route to organise communities around positive change in their areas. It can also be a key focal point for building further community activism and channelling community capacity into local projects.

For example, we heard from Standish Voice about how their neighbourhood plan has stimulated local debate and galvanised community activity (see case study). From Abram Ward Community Cooperative (see case study), the community consultation as part of their neighbourhood plan has been instrumental in shaping their wider plans and activities in the area. Their inventive engagement techniques included using the popular video game, Minecraft, to get year 5 students at local schools, as well as their parents, involved in thinking about what their neighbourhood plan should look like. This supported greater
involvement from young people and families in the objectives of the
neighbourhood plan.

**Case study: Standish Voice and Standish Neighbourhood Plan**

Standish Voice was designated as neighbourhood forum in 2015- the first
neighbourhood forum in the borough- in order to establish a Neighbourhood
Plan for Standish. Standish is a former mining village on the outskirts of Wigan
borough, with a population of approx. 15,000 people, which is due to increase by
approx. 25% due to housebuilding over the next five years.

The pace of change within the area has created some opposition and challenge
from some residents; however, Standish Voice was set up to create positive
ideas and a plan for the type of housing and new infrastructure that the
community needs. For example, through their neighbourhood plan they
challenged the high allocation of permissions for family homes and focused on
the need for smaller units for older people as well as affordable housing, using
evidence from a Housing Needs Assessment (HNA).

Reflecting on the process, Paul Ogden, Vice Chair of Standish Voice, explained
that support and cooperation from Wigan Council had been really important.
Even when there has been disagreement within the community about the type of
development residents want to see, neighbourhood planning has brought these
issues into open debate and engagement. He described this as a “learning
process” which has required experimentation and negotiation of different ideas
and priorities, but which has ultimately enabled residents to work together as a
community, to try and find the solutions. Standish Voice has also opened up new
channels of communication and activity within the village, including through a
Facebook page, community events and an annual Christmas market.

Other community groups elsewhere in Wigan, as well as the council, have
described Standish Voice as a trailblazer in demonstrating the potential of
neighbourhood planning across the borough. Reflecting on the time it has taken
to finalise the neighbourhood plan (which was approved by local referendum in
July 2019), Paul Ogden said that whilst this has been complex and challenging
process, there has also been considerable additional value which has been
galvanised through the process of community engagement.

**Community governance**

Interviewees reflected that neighbourhood forums can be a genuine ‘community-
led’ governance structure, that is not led exclusively by elected politicians. One
workshop participant described how “a community committee can be more
approachable, and less swayed by party politics... but, this can also present a
culture change for local councillors in terms of sharing decision-making and
accountability at a local level.” Ultimately, it is about ensuring the right
relationships that work well within the local area.

We have also heard about when those relationships have been more
challenging. For example, the experience of the Leigh Neighbours Big Local
project in Leigh. The Big Local fund is a £1million endowment to 150 of the most
deprived communities in England. A community partnership is established to
manage the fund. A core objective is that the money should respond to local
priorities and build capacity and leadership within the community.

For Leigh Neighbours, they have experienced some challenges in their
relationship with the council, particularly in the earlier years. This was primarily
around establishing the balance of roles and responsibilities between residents
and councillors within the Big Local governance. There have also been tensions
between the priorities of the council and community partnership in spending the
funds. The partnership has described having to push-back council requests for
spending the money, for example to use it to upgrade cladding of local
properties.

The relationship is improving, however. This improvement is due to an increase in
dialogue and opportunities for more genuine partnership with local councillors as
well as council officers. Local councillors have played a key role in strengthening
those relationships and brokering key partnerships. As one interviewee
highlighted “as the project has matured, [the relationships] have come full circle,
and that mutual respect has come back.”

These experiences have been shared by other Big Local projects across the
country. As NLGN and Local Trust’s ‘Rebalancing the Power’ report states: “the
rebalancing of power between councils and communities will ultimately involve
new dynamics for each - with shifting levels of responsibility and control.” These
shifts can be fractious, frustrating, and require a patient, conscious and open
approach to building relationships and trust from all sides: “For true shared
ownership and accountability to be forged, this will need to be based on both
partners working beyond traditional approaches and shifting their expectations
of each other.”

**Case study: Leigh Neighbours**

Leigh Neighbours, in Leigh West, is one of the 150 Big Local areas across the
country with an approx. £1million investment to spend in their community over a
ten-year period. Their purpose is to bring about sustainable improvements in the
neighbourhood, relating primarily to issues of deprivation, crime, housing and social cohesion. Leigh Neighbours are a registered charity, to secure their legacy beyond the lifetime of the Big Local funding. We interviewed key stakeholders of Leigh Neighbours, including a councillor, Board members, and other community groups based in Leigh. We wanted to find out more about their Big Local journey, their challenges and their impact in the local area.

A core focus for Leigh Neighbours has been environmental projects which are aimed at tidying up the neighbourhood, tackling neglect and decline and improving local pride of place. From local hanging basket workshops, to transforming an overgrown and unloved area of a car park into a thriving community allotment. As one interviewee reflected, these might be relatively small acts, but the activities have a far wider impact in “raising the aspirations of the community.”

Leigh Neighbours were established with a key objective around bringing communities together, and improving cohesion, acceptance and tolerance in the community. The BNP have previously had a presence in the area, and immigration has been the subject of division and tension within the community. We heard how projects have sought to address these divisions, including through events and community activities that bring the whole community together. For example, they have funded youth groups such as Rafiki project (working with young refugees), Leigh Youth Voice and Kamosi (working with Roma migrants) on projects such as the local Big Lunch.

The role of Leigh Neighbours in building partnerships between local institutions was also highlighted by interviewees. This has included a core focus on education, employment and training. For example, working with local schools to support young people and families with healthy eating, cooking and keep fit classes. Leigh Neighbours have also sponsored two local apprenticeships in partnership with Groundwork, have helped twelve Leigh residents get level 2 teaching assistant qualifications, and sponsored 70 children to attend summer schools over the last four years.

Developing local connections and relationships through strengthening community activity has been a core legacy of Leigh Neighbours. By creating opportunities for residents to volunteer and lead community projects as part of the partnership, Leigh Neighbours and the Big Local model has a key role in building new community leadership.

As one interviewee said: “Leigh Neighbours has empowered a number of people in the local community. I know this because if the money wasn’t there for
whatever reason, the activities would continue – because people would pull up their sleeves and get on and get those things done anyway.”

Reflections for the future of localism in Wigan

Community empowerment sits at the heart of Wigan Council’s strategic plan, backed up by resources for community organisations and investment in strengthening local social infrastructure. The Deal’s strong emphasis on partnership was echoed and reflected by our VCSE interviewees – a testament to how relationships have been strengthened in deed as well as word. Public service reform has also created more place-based working, with seven service delivery footprints and integration between key services, and a more relational approach based around assets and community collaboration.

These foundations would indicate the potential for further opportunities in Wigan for neighbourhood power and the transfer of decision-making to a local level. Neighbourhood forums in the borough demonstrate the power of community-led plan making, and the empowerment and capacity building that comes from this process. Leigh Neighbours and the Big Local model also shows the power of local governance underpinned by independent resources and community co-production.

There could be further opportunities in the borough for devolving resources to greater local control; for example, by devolving a proportion of the Community Investment Fund to local areas\textsuperscript{v}. Wigan’s public service footprints are also opening up new opportunities for community delivery and community commissioning.

The role of communities in shaping local economic opportunities was also a key theme of our research. Both in terms of opportunities for community businesses as well as community ambition to have a greater say in the type of businesses, jobs and opportunities to ‘spend local’ in their neighbourhoods. The Wigan Deal 2030 includes a new economic strategy for strengthening town centres and high streets across the borough. There are fertile opportunities for the social economy as part of this – building on the standout initiative from Made in Wigan, for example. Strengthening opportunities for community trading and enterprise is a key route to ensure the sustainability of local infrastructure through independent income streams as well as creating opportunities for local inclusive growth\textsuperscript{v}vi.

Developing future leadership in communities.

A key theme that emerged from our research, was on developing future leadership in communities to ensure that there is a new generation of volunteers,
staff and social entrepreneurs to drive and sustain community activity. As the
manager of one community centre, put it: “we need to be keeping our community
centres alive.”

Workshop participants described that, currently, community activity often relies
on residents that have the skills, and more crucially, the time, to give – and often
these are older and retired people. Others pointed out that the ‘turnover’ of
younger volunteers is often higher. This is because engagement with younger
volunteers is often focused on raising their aspirations – and finding them paid
employment and training opportunities. This can mean that they do not stay as
volunteers or develop within the organisation.

There was an identified need within the community sector around good practice
for succession planning, recruitment of new volunteers and trustees, and
promotion of community opportunities for younger people. Ideas included,
targeted projects with High Schools and youth initiatives to promote community
volunteering and using career fayres to promote jobs in social enterprises and
community businesses. Others highlighted that future workforce sustainability
should be a key outcome considered as part of the Community Investment Fund.
References

i LGC Award for Council of the Year 2019. More information available at: https://awards.lgcpplus.com/winners-2019

ii LGC Award for Council of the Year 2019. More information available at: https://awards.lgcpplus.com/winners-2019

iii Wigan were facing a projected cut of 160 million to their budget.

iv Wigan Council have created over £115 million savings, at the same time as increasing resident satisfaction (from 48% - 65% between 2008 and 2016).

v Donna Hall, former CEO of Wigan Council. Council roundtable, August 2018.


viii LGA. 2017. Wigan Council – Engaging staff in a new vision.” Available at: https://www.local.gov.uk/wigan-council-engaging-staff-new-vision


xiii The Smith Institute. 2015. Smart Localism. Available at: https://www.bl.uk/britishlibrary/-/media/bl/global/social.../j.../smart-localism.pdf
