

Summary notes

Learning from Big Local

A 3ni members' event

Thursday 12 February 2026 | 1pm–4pm | BEAT, Lea Farm Mount, Hawksworth, Leeds LS5 3PX

About 3ni

3ni is a new social value partnership bringing policy and practice together to transform neighbourhoods across the UK. Through collaboration and innovation, we support local government and the wider public sector in driving meaningful, lasting change from the ground up. Our approach is rooted in what makes places thrive: strong local connections, empowered communities, and the social infrastructure essential to long-term regeneration. Drawing on evidence, data, and proven tools, we help our partners enable community-led change, turning insight into real-world impact. Inspired by pioneering local authorities and initiatives like Big Local, we know that investing in new and existing community networks leads to faster, more successful transformation.

Big Local: the concept

The Big Local programme has been one of the most ambitious community-led funding initiatives in England. As the programme reaches its conclusion, this was a moment to pause, reflect and explore what its legacy can teach us about building stronger, more resilient communities. 3ni brought together community groups and local government officers to reflect on the learnings, share their own ideas and hear directly from a Big Local project, BEAT.

Chloe and her team are currently distilling the learning emerging from Big Local, and she shared some of the earliest insights from their work. These findings will continue to evolve as the team analyses the extensive material they've gathered, with regular updates to be published on their new Learning from Big Local website.

Before introducing the early insights, Chloe outlined the purpose and design of the programme. Big Local was conceived as a long-term, resident-led experiment funded by the National Lottery Community Fund which gave just over £1m to 150 neighbourhoods across England, as flexible, non-prescriptive funding. Each area needed at least eight volunteers, with a majority drawn from the community itself, making the model both ambitious and unlike anything that had come before. As Chloe noted, much of the learning sits not just in the outcomes, but in what happened along the way.

The programme was supported by 9 pillars that form the core of what the initiative was about:

1. Hyper-local areas, relative deprivation
2. £1m non-prescriptive funding, long-term
3. Flexible and responsive support – central and in-area
4. Values – resident-led, patient and non-judgmental
5. Time and willingness from core resident leadership group
6. Programme guidance for resident leadership group
7. Residents needs, views and time from wider community
8. Local/wider agencies, VCS, businesses and assets

What happened

In each area, there were initial steps taken to build the Big Local project, which can be found across all partnerships. They involved



Each Big Local area focused on different priorities, shaped by what mattered most to their community. For some, that meant supporting health or employment; for others, it involved offering small grants to spark new ideas or meeting immediate needs when times were tough. As Chloe shared, the latest findings point to two major outcomes:

1. More residents' needs are better met: in practice, this meant more and better-connected services provided locally as well as additional funds brought into the area
2. Community is more resilient: Big Local research identified more community leaders in the area, an improved sense of confidence in getting things done and a quick response to crisis possible.

None of this happens in isolation. These outcomes rest on a set of conditions that take time to build: accessible assets and welcoming spaces, a growing sense of belonging, improved wellbeing and skills, and a community that feels represented, valued and able to shape what happens next. Together, these elements create the environment in which resident-led change can take root and endure.

Areas of focus

In the lead up to the day, we asked attendees to share with us what would be most helpful to cover in the session. Four areas of interest were identified:

- Resident leadership
- Community engagement
- Community assets and spaces
- Place-based pride and connection

Across the programme, resident leadership proved to be something that had to be nurtured rather than assumed. Areas that made the strongest starts were those given intensive, on-the-ground support and a little early funding to spark engagement, backed by central training, networking and specialist advice. Over time, it became clear that inclusion takes patience and structure: expectations need to be transparent, evaluation needs to be valued, and central teams must stay close enough to local realities to respond to very different needs.

A similar pattern played out in community engagement. Rather than expecting everyone to participate in the same way, areas benefited from embracing the concept of a ladder of involvement, from shaping plans through consultation, to volunteering, to setting up new projects with small grants. What made this work was the investment in people: time to encourage volunteers, support for leadership groups to reflect on diversity and inclusion, and targeted outreach to bring in those who don't usually step forward. The payoff was tangible. Decisions became more grounded in residents' lived experience, more volunteers came through the door, and new leaders emerged who could carry the work forward.

Physical spaces also mattered more than expected. Bringing people together requires places that feel welcoming, familiar and rooted in the area's identity. Many communities began by mapping what they already had and what was missing, then repurposed existing buildings, improved local assets, or created new spaces altogether. These efforts depended on strong relationships with stakeholders, flexible long-term funding, and a committed group of people willing to run and sustain the space. When those elements aligned, the environment itself became a catalyst for further activity.

Underpinning all of this was the quiet but powerful growth of place-based pride and connection. Free or low-cost activities, from sports and arts to heritage events, celebrations, trips and informal get-togethers, helped residents feel more connected to one another and more invested in where they live. Much of this was volunteer-led, and it created the kind of everyday encounters that build trust and belonging. Over time, these small, everyday moments built a shared sense that the area wasn't just being improved, but shaped collectively by the people who call it home.



Bringing this to life: the example of BEAT

Cllr Hannah, a BEAT trustee, recalled the early days of the Big Local project in Leeds, then known as HAVA, when a sudden influx of funding brought both excitement and unease to a community long overlooked. Early enthusiasm quickly collided with tension as people disagreed on priorities, and even when new leadership steadied things, progress felt fragile and slow. Yet those difficult years became formative. Working through conflict helped residents clarify what mattered, leading to their first major achievement: transforming a troubled park into a space the community could reclaim. Family fun days became moments of listening as much as celebration, and small gestures, like children painting the skate park or Hannah nervously stepping onto a skateboard, helped build pride and shared ownership. Over time, the group learned that leadership was less about having answers and more about listening, especially when it was uncomfortable.

As the work evolved, the need for a physical space became undeniable. Without somewhere to gather, community life was limited to a few dry summer days, and the push for a building grew into a symbol of permanence and legacy. Securing that space was a long, exhausting journey shaped by COVID, shifting plans, and the politics of an estate where organisations had long worked in silos. Residents explored every option, driven by the belief that they deserved a place of their own. Standing together at the event in a building they once thought they'd never be allowed to enter, let alone shape, was itself a powerful legacy. It reflected not just bricks and mortar, but the resilience of the people who pushed through the hardest moments and the staff who carried much of the strain, showing how community transformation can reshape what people believe is possible in the place they call home.

Building trust

Sadie Oddy, BEAT's Chief Executive, described how the transition from a project to a charity took far longer and demanded far more resilience than anyone expected. Securing charitable status stretched over years, forcing the group to repeatedly regroup while residents and partners kept the momentum alive. A key shift came when the long unoccupied former YMCA building was put up for sale, creating a tangible opportunity for residents to imagine a community led space aligning with what they had been working toward. At the same time, the team embraced asset-based community development and strengthened relationships with councillors, the local authority, health partners and neighbourhood-based staff, creating the shared space for dialogue that had been missing.

As BEAT matured, it chose to stay intentionally lean, relying on partners' expertise and residents' energy rather than building a large staff team. Listening became central to its governance, with residents making up at least half the board and young people shaping decisions through a young leaders board. Trust grew slowly through everyday conversations, clear governance and moments of shared joy that helped turn visibility into belonging. Now, with a seven-year lease and a plan to purchase the building through social lending, BEAT is focused on securing its long-term future. Income is growing as tenants move in and activities expand, and a capital development plan will guide how the building evolves. The organisation remains committed to offering a trusted space where people feel heard and connected, creating the conditions for the community's own ideas to shape what comes next.

Thinking about community change in practice

The session didn't only focus on sharing information, but also gave an opportunity to attendees to share ideas, tips and good practice when it comes to working in communities. During our break-out rooms, attendees had the opportunity to discuss what worked well (and didn't work so well). Three main themes came out: engagement, asset-mapping and partnerships.

1. Engagement

Participants emphasised that meaningful engagement begins with having the conversations communities actually want to have, not the ones organisations assume they should. Trust grows when people feel heard, when their lived experience sits alongside formal power, and when engagement moves from a needs-led mindset to one that recognises existing strengths. Food, shared events and inter-generational activities all help bring people together, but the real work happens through relationships, noticing the “mayors of the block,” understanding people’s self-interest, and offering opportunities that build confidence and leadership. One-to-one conversations matter, especially for quieter voices, and believing in people’s ambition can unlock energy that might otherwise stay hidden. Quick wins can help build early trust, but they only work when grounded in genuine listening.

Participants were equally clear about what gets in the way. Engagement falters when there is a lack of mutual understanding between communities and councils, when dominant personalities block others from taking part, or when work is done to people rather than with them. Short-term funding makes it harder to build anything sustainable, and chasing money without considering the community’s own priorities can pull efforts off course.

2. Mapping

When it comes to understanding local assets, participants stressed the importance of starting with people. Community connectors, the individuals who know what’s happening and where, are often the best guides to local strengths. Speaking directly to residents, including young people who may not come forward through traditional routes, helps build a fuller picture of what already exists. Some suggested creative approaches, such as hosting an ‘unsung hero’ competition to surface the individuals and groups who make a difference behind the scenes. Elected members can also play a useful role, offering insight into networks and relationships that may not be immediately visible.

3. Partnerships

Strong partnerships were seen as essential to sustaining community-led work. Good relationships with local authorities remain a priority, but they depend on honesty, – being clear about where things stand, what is possible, and what support is needed. Participants encouraged linking with as many partners as possible, recognising that no single organisation can or should do everything. When partnerships are open, transparent and grounded in shared purpose, they create the conditions for communities to access a wider range of support without duplicating effort.



Bringing it together

At the end of the session, we brought together all our speakers and gave the opportunity for attendees and speakers to explore the themes of today. A few key things came out of the discussion:

- **Trust-building and relationship development:** Trust grows through steady, patient engagement and by meeting people where they already are. Speakers highlighted the influence of local connectors and the value of listening without assumptions. Even though every area is different and often messy, long-term relationship-building remains the strongest foundation.
- **Investment in people and capacity:** Communities need investment in people, not just buildings. Skilled workers with time, emotional capacity and conflict-navigation skills are essential for genuine engagement. This work can't simply be added onto existing roles; it requires dedicated staff who can stay present over the long term.
- **Time and patience vs. pressure:** Meaningful community development moves at the pace of relationships, not deadlines. Many programmes push for quick wins, creating tension between external pressure and the patience needed for real change. Allowing work to unfold naturally often leads to deeper, more lasting outcomes.
- **Organisational learning and adaptation:** Support structures evolve as organisations learn what communities actually need. Local Trust strengthened its expectations around inclusion, evaluation and support as insights emerged. The experience shows the importance of starting with solid infrastructure and adapting as you go.
- **Local authority readiness and skills gaps:** Some local authorities still treat engagement as consultation rather than shared power. This gap highlights the need for skill-building so officers and councillors understand what genuine community leadership looks like. Strengthening these skills helps create better partnerships with residents.
- **Communication and managing expectations:** Clear, honest communication helps maintain trust and avoid misunderstandings. Regular updates and realistic conversations about challenges and timelines keep communities informed and respected. Managing expectations is about clarity, not lowering ambition.
- **Conflict as normal and necessary:** Conflict is a natural part of community life, not a sign of failure. Anticipating disagreement and building conflict-resolution skills into the process strengthens relationships. When handled well, conflict clarifies priorities and deepens understanding.
- **Leveraging existing community energy:** The most effective work builds on energy that already exists in a place. Even frustration or controversy can become a powerful starting point for engagement. By recognising where people are already invested, practitioners can channel momentum into long-term change.

Bringing everyone in this room, the solutions are clear: you need time, good listening skills and be led by the community. While no one denies this work can be challenging, one thing in the room was clear: this matters and none of us are alone in this. 3ni will continue to bring together like-minded people to overcome challenges, develop solutions and offer support.