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# Power in Big Local partnerships

Centre for Ethnographic Research, University of Kent

Written by Dr Dawn Lyon, Dr Carin Tunåker, Keira Pratt-Boyd  
and Professor Dimitrios Theodossopoulos

# Local Trust

## About this report

This report is about power and the practice of decision making in Big Local: a resident-led, place-based programme. It is based on ethnographic research with Big Local areas. The work forms part of the Local Trust research strategy 2021-26, and was commissioned to help Local Trust support Big Local areas to understand how power works at the partnership level and develop resident-led practice.

Dr Dawn Lyon, Dr Carin Tunåker, Keira Pratt-Boyden and Professor Dimitrios Theodossopoulos

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# 1. Executive summary

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This report is about the practice of decision making in a resident-led, place-based programme. It explores the operation of power within decision making, how decisions are made, by and with whom and in what contexts. It considers how particular ideas gather appeal, how some voices are heard more than others, and how beliefs in 'the right way' to make decisions matter and can have unintended consequences of limiting agendas and imagination. Finally, it identifies ways to strengthen decision making in a community-led programme by developing new forms of participation and sharing power among all sections of the community.

The research is based on Big Local. Big Local is a resident-led funding programme providing groups of people in 150 areas in England with £1.15m each to spend across 10 to 15 years to create lasting change in their neighbourhoods. A key goal of the Big Local programme is for communities to build confidence and capacity for the longer term (Local Trust, 2019). In Big Local areas, resident-led partnerships<sup>1</sup> play a crucial role in decision making and guide the overall direction of Big Local in their area.

The research was conducted by the Centre for Ethnographic Research at the University of Kent through interviews and online observation (virtual ethnography). We present our findings in five main areas: culture, power and processes; partnership rules and agendas; membership, recruitment and diversity; voice, power and inequality; and spaces of

communication and decision making. Our research revealed how power resides in different phases of the processes involved in decision making as well as in the final outcome. We also found that although most Big Local partnerships aim to include all community members, barriers remain based on protected characteristics such as race and gender that affect individuals' participation in Big Local partnerships. We carried out the research during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the move to online decision making has disrupted partnerships' internal working cultures and created new opportunities for inclusivity. We conclude that power operates in different ways across decision making processes and that this is influenced by the space decisions take place in, whose voice is heard and why, and how rules are made and interpreted.

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<sup>1</sup> Partnerships must be made up of at least eight people, of which over half must be residents. They are sometimes known as decision-making boards or steering groups.

## What counts as a decision? Culture, power and processes

Decisions are more than a moment in time; they are a process that often extends over time and includes hidden and overt aspects. Power is often embedded in the unrecognised parts of this process. Decision making is a process and not a singular moment. Yet, we tend to think about decisions regarding the final moments in which they are settled rather than recognising the 'micro decisions' that carve paths towards them. The process, in turn, is influenced by the surrounding organisational culture and how members of a partnership think about decisions, informal conversations and other actions involved in decision making. The way that power operates, therefore, is not always open and visible.

- Many of the decisions we take are hidden or not recognised as decisions. Step by step processes of decision making ultimately guide and contribute to understanding the topic of a decision and, therefore, also influence larger decisions.
- Most of our research participants considered the 'big' and 'final' decision determined by a formal vote as the most notable or essential part of the process. However, the smaller discussions via messages, informal chats or phone calls were mentioned more fleetingly and often understood as unimportant or unrelated to the decision making process.
- We want to draw attention to how unseen decisions can shape the possible outcomes and how power operates invisibly in the 'in-between' spaces.

## Partnership rules and agendas

Our research explored the formal ways of organising action within partnerships. We found that although Local Trust does not give many rules for partnerships to follow, partnerships nonetheless develop structures which become embedded in their practice and activity.

- Rules and regulations are made mainly by members and workers in partnerships and tend not to be questioned or changed over time. There is little explicit discussion of rules and policies in the data we collected from Big Local areas. The taken-for-granted acceptance of rules and formal structures we have uncovered may unnecessarily constrain the work of Big Local partnerships. In contrast, clear plans and objectives are useful reference points to guide activity and assess decisions.
- Uncertainty about what a partnership's rules are and what they mean sometimes causes confusion in meetings. This may have a 'chilling effect' that prevents people from participating, which inhibits the development of some ideas.
- Meeting agendas are open in principle, but through what is seen as the norm or because of differing levels of engagement, they tend to be created by chairs and workers. Agendas shape which decisions might be made, and as a taken-for-granted practice, they can also conceal power relations. In practice, the chair or workers often have considerable control over how agendas are presented and the space given to different topics.
- Free-flowing discussion or free space within meetings can stimulate broader conversation and ideas.
- It is important to consider the pace of meetings. The way meetings are run, for instance, by speeding things along or slowing them down, has implications for participation.

## Membership, recruitment and diversity

Protected characteristics of partnership members, such as their race, gender or class, and how these 'intersect' to create layers of disadvantage, must be considered to ensure inclusivity and participation. We have seen how partnerships make significant efforts to be inclusive and encourage participation from different parts of the community. However, hidden discrimination still occurs, and there are barriers to participation within partnerships, even if some of these may be unintentional and reflect the obstacles that exist in broader society. For example, who is recruited, and therefore represented, on membership boards of the partnerships is in part determined by those who already hold power within the community.

- Diversity is both perceived as positive and a challenge for partnerships. Issues of diversity and inclusion that exist in broader society are prevalent also in the Big Local partnerships.
- Race/ethnicity is the terrain of greatest challenge: it is an example of 'wilful blindness', a way to avoid uncomfortable information about others.
- Several characteristics remain under-addressed or acknowledged, including class, gender, different types of disability and how these impact the accessibility of meetings and the possibilities of participation.
- Recruitment can end up relying on members' social networks, which prevents diversification.
- Mindful focus and reflection on issues that might prevent diversity help partnerships to be more inclusive and allows more voices to be heard.

## Participation in decision making: Voice, power and inequality

At times, dominant voices exercise power over others in meeting situations. At times, people show deference and respect to those with dominant voices and appreciate how chairs, for instance, run meetings and get things done. However, there is also frustration and recognition that this contributes to inequalities in participation. People sometimes feel silenced, and their views are not always welcomed, notably when they are not expressed in what is deemed 'the right way'. Yet, there are also numerous examples of creative and original gestures of inclusivity that make a tangible difference to how participants feel – and, we imagine, a difference to outcomes of decision making.

- Dominant voices are useful for running meetings and keeping discussion focused. This style may be effective for making things happen but sometimes does so at the cost of the participation and inclusion of others.
- 'Silencing' mechanisms include meeting styles and formats. For example, always adhering to the same agenda may discourage free conversation and inhibit ideas.
- Ways to help all members participate include creating space for listening at regular points during meetings or preparing materials in an accessible way.

## Spaces of communication and decision making

We examined what or who motivates and inspires active involvement and how this happens informally and online. Understanding informal power structures and organisational culture is key to understanding how groups work when making both small decisions and wide structural ones. Some partnerships use group messaging or social media for communication about decisions, and some communicate mostly by email. In a pre-pandemic time, such decisions were often taken over a cup of tea, which has implications for the atmosphere, culture and functioning of each group. In an increasingly digital world, understanding the reasons for digital inclusion in decision making is vital. Digital communication has advantages and disadvantages concerning participation and decision making and, therefore, also the operation of power.

- Digital poverty and digital exclusion affect partnerships, both for in-group and out-group communications.
- It is important to consider the space and atmosphere of decision making, both face-to-face and online. Allowing time for humour and informal conversation can boost participation and shape cultural identity.
- Partnerships are navigating participation in virtual meetings via Zoom, with significant obstacles. Most have found that Zoom has a way of making meetings more effective, but this also leaves less time for informal and unstructured conversations.
- Different mediums of communication hold varying degrees of legitimacy for decision making. While some groups find email a professional way of taking decisions, others consider Zoom meetings more reliable.



James O Jenkins

## Conclusions and recommendations

The findings of our research project lead to a call for reflection: to acknowledge power differences, then share that awareness with others, in the process of meetings or in the course of decision making. If power is not a static thing, it follows that the power configuration of any meeting (or decision making process) can be transformed. Practising power differently is both a goal and a process. It offers an opportunity to enhance forms and practices of participation and inclusivity in decision making – and celebrate the resident-led model that Big Local has so brilliantly developed.

### We summarise our key recommendations here:

#### Understanding power

When we reflect, we notice that power works in complicated ways. Many parts of how it works are hidden and often unintentional. By having a better understanding of power, and an awareness of it, we can also challenge how it works.

#### Cooperation

The Big Local ethos is already to cooperate and to work and make a positive difference together. Inspiring those who might find it difficult to have a voice and allowing different types of spaces is essential. Consider trying something new, moving away from agendas, having informal meetings now and then, and finding new ways of working together.

#### Self-reflection

One way of doing this is through self-reflection. If you are a resident member, worker or chair who often takes the lead on decision making, take some time to reflect

on how things work in your partnership. Can meetings happen in different ways? Can someone else take a turn at chairing the meeting? Having a conversation with those members who are quieter could be helpful.

#### Awareness

By doing some self-reflection, we also have a better chance of tackling inequalities, for example, those related to ethnicity, race, age, disability, gender and class. It is important to acknowledge and reflect how these protected characteristics impact decision making in open conversation. Members from minority positions often wait to hear this acknowledgement, which, in turn, invites and empowers them to share and participate.

#### Minimising formality

The form of regular meetings can also discourage some members from speaking. Meeting structures can be relaxed by providing opportunities for free talking through breakout groups or informal cups of tea and chats. It is easier for some members to share their viewpoint in small-group conversation. These could be separate, informal meetings as well as the usual meetings or a casual section of otherwise formal meetings.

#### Taking small steps

The participants in this research shared or proposed various small steps that support participation. These include rotating meeting chairs, actively supporting the development of agenda items, text and audio-visual summaries of meeting documents, induction and buddying schemes, payments for childcare, sensitivity about meeting locations, coffee Wednesdays and good food! (See Recommendations for the complete list.)

# 2. Acknowledgements

We have greatly enjoyed undertaking the research for this report. It has been a privileged opportunity to hear about the initiatives and energies of Big Local partnerships across England. We have found ourselves in awe of their work and humbled by their commitments and achievements.

We would like to thank all the participants in this research. They include the interviewees who gave their time and shared their stories; the partnerships who welcomed us into their meetings; and the Big Local reps who patiently explained the localities' details to us and went to a lot of effort to help us gain access to the partnerships; Local Trust staff, partnerships members, and colleagues from other organisations who attended our 'coffee and consider' discussion (April 2021) and webinar (May 2021); and Lucy, Sue and Jayne at Local Trust for commissioning us to do this research and for assisting us greatly along the way.

We would like to thank Business Friend for transcribing the interviews; and colleagues with whom we discussed our emerging findings, particularly Mandy Wilson, Angela Ellis Paine, Rob Macmillan and Ellie Jupp. In addition, we are grateful to the Research and Innovation Services at the University of Kent for their support for this project.

We have learnt an enormous amount about community-based, resident-led decision making and hope to use this new knowledge in the communities to which we belong! Thank you, Local Trust and Big Local.

MEET THE TEAM



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# 3. Introduction

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## Power in decision making

The operation of power in decision making is complex, whether in community groups, work organisations or everyday life. Struggles over power are common in all these contexts since power in society is not shared equally. Whether in a charity or a company, Recognising how decisions take shape in practice is far from straightforward. In community settings, as elsewhere, people's understanding of a situation, the values they hold dear, their relationships with others, and habitual ways of thinking and acting all come into play in decision making.

When a decision is taken in a meeting, either through easy consensus or vigorous debate, there is usually more to the story than is immediately apparent. It's easy to overlook the processes by which decisions are made, and the power dynamics that underpin them can easily be overlooked. Understanding these processes is essential to recognise and disentangle power in decision making and promote participation and inclusivity. It is these other stories that are this report's focus.

The vision of Big Local is for "empowered, resilient, dynamic, asset-rich" communities to make their own decisions about what is best for their areas. Big Local works directly with people "living, working, studying and playing" in areas rather than via the organisations representing them. Through the freedom to act autonomously (with support), the Big Local programme aims for communities to build confidence and capacity for the longer term (Local Trust, 2019). In other words, they seek to achieve 'social power' to effect deep and meaningful change (Sheila McKechnie Foundation). However, previous research

by Local Trust demonstrates a potential for inequalities and power struggles to arise within localities, despite Big Local's commitment to resident-led decision making (Local Trust, 2020; McCabe et al., 2020). As Local Trust notes, "It's about who shapes the conversation, not just who takes the decisions" (2020, p. 7).

This report's research addresses a vital question: How does power operate in partnerships' decision making? To find out, we focus decision-making practices in and at the edges of partnership meetings. We think of power not as a static, singular 'thing' but as a process. We, therefore, explore how decisions are made, by and with whom, and in what contexts (including online). We consider how particular ideas gather appeal and how some voices are heard more than others. We uncover how beliefs in 'the right way' to make decisions matter and can have unintended consequences of limiting agendas and imagination. And we highlight the huge commitment and creativity that inspire participation and lead to positive social change.



Colin McPherson

To analyse the operation of power, we use different ideas from the social sciences. Stephen Lukes' (1974) three different faces of power help us notice that power can take the form of:

1. exerting power **over** others directly
2. 'setting the agenda' for decision making
3. 'hidden power' where some people are excluded from decision making but accept this as the natural order of things.

Also, we consider how knowledge is used as a form of symbolic power, for instance, when someone who has long been familiar with how meetings operate through their work (as a civil servant for instance) arrives in a community meeting with a 'feel for the game'. We analyse how this form of power might exclude others from the conversation as a result of the hierarchies it creates. Big Local areas nevertheless benefit from members who provide leadership **for** others and take the initiative, perhaps drawing inspiration from their previous knowledge. Indeed, power can stimulate activity and lead to achievement. To highlight how this happens in practice, we draw on Jenny Pearce's (2013) discussion of the distinction between power **over** and power **with**. Pearce argues that 'horizontal' power relations, limiting the power of individuals or small groups to dominate

others, foster a culture of inclusion (see appendix A for a fuller discussion of power).

Our analysis pays particular attention to who is involved in decision making regarding their protected characteristics (gender, age, ethnicity and so on) and associated experiences. Previous research (Local Trust, 2020) suggests protected characteristics **intersect** and increase the likelihood of voices being silenced in Big Local partnerships, such as those from younger age groups or from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. In this work, we have used the idea of 'intersectionality' as a lens to consider power relations and the implications of the different characteristics among our research participants. Understanding these processes is essential to recognise and disentangle power in decision making and promote participation and inclusivity.

Overall, this report contributes to an understanding of how resident-led models of decision making can lead to a transfer of power to communities. It explores the obstacles, norms and practices that inhibit full participation and sustain inequalities. It shares insights and ideas – many of which interviewees proposed – for simple changes which would enhance participation in decision making.

## Researching power through virtual ethnography

We undertook this study using ethnography. Traditionally, researchers carry out ethnography by spending an extended period with a community to understand it from the inside. 'Focused ethnography' (Knoblauch, 2005), which consists of intense engagement with a social group or setting over a short duration, is widely recognised as an effective strategy for applied research and we used the approach for this study. Furthermore, this project was based on 'virtual ethnography' (Boellstorff et al., 2012) which involves participating in live social situations online. We carried out online participant observation in 10 partnership meetings and conducted in-depth interviews with 26 individuals<sup>2</sup> through Zoom/MS Teams or by telephone across five Big Local areas.<sup>3</sup> The selection of 'case study' areas took place from November to December 2020 and we carried out fieldwork in February and March 2021. We also read partnerships' key documents, such as terms of reference and meeting minutes, as well as looking at their websites, Facebook pages, and Twitter and Instagram feeds. We assured anonymity by concealing all areas and names, and obtained full consent from all participants (see appendix B for fuller discussion of methodology).

We conducted this research exclusively online during England's third lockdown because of the coronavirus pandemic. Doing so presented challenges, limitations and ethical concerns, but we gained enormous understanding from witnessing the resilience and flexibility of partnership members in their new virtual worlds. Through the use of Zoom and MS Teams and participating with partnerships online via their means, such as email, texts, phone calls, video calls and social media, we had a sense of 'being there' (Borneman and Hammoudi 2009). Indeed, we found that combining data from individual interviews with observations of partnership meetings was necessary and effective to gain insight into how decision making functions in each area.

Members of the University of Kent's Centre for Ethnographic Research carried out this research. The team – Dawn Lyon, Carin Tunåker, Keira Pratt-Boyden and Dimitrios Theodossopoulos – drew on social science principles to explore that which is taken-for-granted in everyday life in the analysis presented here. Our work in this project reflects our commitment to producing high-quality ethnographic research, methodological innovation and meaningful public engagement. The project's outputs, therefore, include a graphic representation of our main findings for sharing with Big Local partnerships in addition to this report. Dimitrios Theodossopoulos took the lead in developing this 'comic', together with artist Charlotte Bailey.

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<sup>2</sup> Individuals interviewed for this research held various roles within the partnerships. We mention these roles throughout the report. Those in paid positions are referred to as Big Local workers. A locally trusted organisation (LTO) is chosen by people in a Big Local area or the partnership to administer and account for funding, and in addition may deliver activities or services on behalf of a partnership. Areas might work with more than one locally trusted organisation depending on the plan and the skills and resources required. LTO representatives may also attend partnership meetings. Individual residents who volunteer in partnerships are referred to as 'resident members', and those who are called chairs and co-chairs are also mostly resident partnership members. Big Local reps are individuals appointed by Local Trust to offer tailored support to a Big Local area and share successes, challenges and news with the organisation.

<sup>3</sup> We distinguish between Big Local areas as the 'place' and Big Local partnerships as the 'decision-making group'. A Big Local partnership is a group of at least eight people, of which over half must be residents of the area, and guides the overall direction of a Big Local area.

# 4. What counts as a decision? Culture, power and processes

## Key findings

Decisions are more than a moment in time; they are a process that often extends over time and includes hidden and overt aspects. Power is often embedded in the unrecognised parts of this process. Decision making is a process and not a singular moment. Yet we tend to think about decisions concerning the final moments in which they are settled rather than recognising the 'micro decisions' that carve paths towards them. The process, in turn, is influenced by the surrounding organisational culture and how partnership members think about decisions, informal conversations and other actions. So, the way that power operates is not always open and visible.

- Many decisions we take are hidden or not recognised as decisions. However, step by step processes in decision making ultimately guide and contribute to understanding the topic of a decision and, therefore, also influence larger decisions.
- Most of our research participants considered the 'big' and 'final' decision determined by a formal vote as the process's most significant or important part. However, the smaller discussions through messages, informal chats or phone calls were mentioned more fleetingly and often understood as unimportant or unrelated to the decision making process.
- We want to draw attention to how unseen decisions can shape the possible outcomes and how power operates invisibly in the 'in-between' spaces.

### WHO DEFINES WHAT DECISIONS ARE IMPORTANT OR NOT?

#### THOSE PAID?



I GO ABOVE AND BEYOND FOR THIS PARTNERSHIP.

#### THOSE WITH TIME?



I WANT TO DO A GOOD JOB. EFFICIENCY IS KEY.

#### SOCIAL CAPITAL?



EVERYONE IN THE COMMUNITY KNOWS ME. AND I WANT WHAT'S BEST FOR THEM.

In our everyday lives, we make decisions continuously. These decisions could be as simple as deciding whether to go left or right, choosing what to wear that day or what to have for dinner. Some are complex and have extensive consequences, such as deciding to move house or change our work. We think about and consider some decisions, perhaps discussing them with family, friends or colleagues before making them. We make others without even thinking about them first. In our research, members of the different partnerships mentioned a difference between small and big decisions and how the decision's size affects the level of discussion and communication medium used. The size also affected whether everyone's involvement in the partnership was considered necessary to take the decision. Most partnership members thought smaller decisions were acceptable to take in smaller groups, or even by one person, mainly to minimise time. However, we noted there were hidden levels of decision making, and sometimes long lead-ins to a significant decision shaped how the final decision was made, reflecting who holds power in the partnership.

### **Exploring decisions ethnographically**

An ethnographic approach to decision making allows us to analyse the cultural context of decisions. Boholm et al. (2013) argue that decisions are 'culturally embedded' and that choices are framed from both expectations and processes before a decision is made. We have approached decision making within the framework of considering decisions as processes that are not leading to right

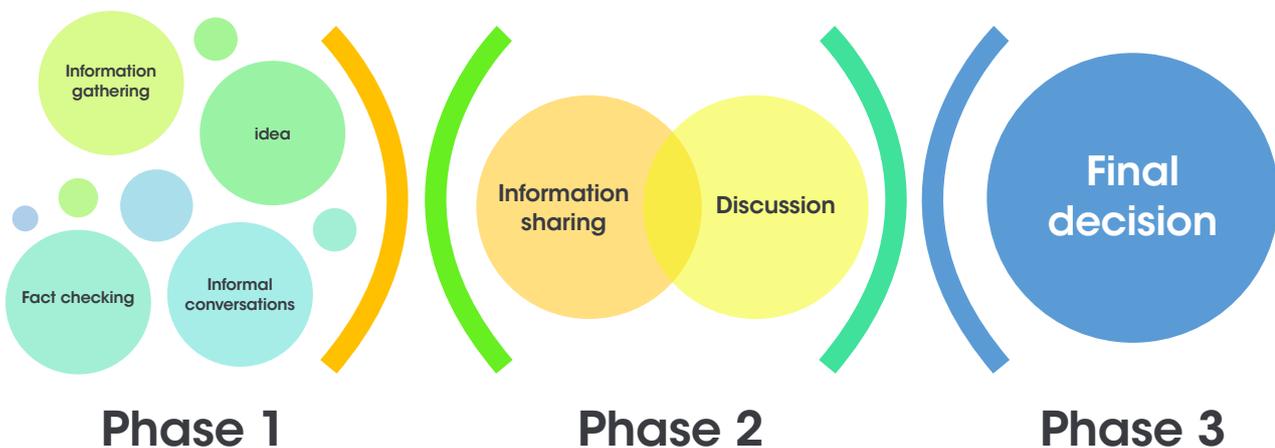
or wrong outcomes but rather with an interest in what impacts these processes in different settings. We want to draw attention to how unseen and invisible decisions can shape the possible outcomes, and ultimately also how power operates invisibly in the in-between spaces. Heiss (2018, p. 237) considers decision-making processes as a continuum consisting of three stages: simple, complex and fundamental. He also recognises how decisions can sway between these categories within the continuum. To think about decisions as a continuum is useful since most decisions are not static; the goalposts of decisions change over time. For example, consider the steps a partnership needs to take to decide about funding a project and how they may have consciously or unconsciously navigated those steps. Whose idea was it in the first place? Who did they discuss it with initially? Perhaps someone met another partnership member on the way to the shop and they conversed about it. Or the group might have put the decision on hold for months while dealing with other decisions, only to return to it with new ideas and perspectives. The pace of decision making and how the processes function depend on the organisation's cultural setting (Heiss, 2018). We see this through the procedures that each partnership has set up in its official decision-making processes (see section five). For example, one partnership may have a standard procedure to outsource parts of its processes to a smaller 'task force' before presenting a proposal to the wider partnership and making a final decision. Others might rely more heavily on informal conversations. We also see this in all the socio-cultural conditions that surround each context and decision.

## Decision-making processes

It is hard to know when a decision's process starts and ends. Many of us consider the final outcome as the most vital and relevant aspect of decision making, and perhaps even imagine that power resides with the person who 'got their way'. The decision-making process involves several interlinking phases (see Figure 1). Within Big Local partnerships, we found this process included, for example, an individual or organisation presenting an idea for funding, followed by gathering and fact-checking information. They share this information among partnership members and discuss it before taking a final decision. The first phase often involved just one member of the partnership (usually a worker) or a small sub-group,

as well as informal conversations within smaller groups. The second phase was a more formalised conversation or presentation to the wider partnership group, resulting in a discussion and opinion sharing. The discussions outcome in phase two could lead to further fact checking, informal conversations or information gathering before voting on the matter. As such, the process is not always linear and many smaller decisions are taken along the way before a partnership takes a formal, overt vote. When we asked different individuals 'how are decisions made?', most alluded to a process, a set of time spent considering decisions, and some formal processes cementing the decision.

Figure 1: Process of decision making.



## Sample decision process: funding a new project

The worker of one partnership wants to create a new project during the pandemic and lead on it. The worker contacts the relevant organisation to take on the work and meets them to establish how it would work. The worker brings a resident member from the partnership to the meeting with the organisation. The worker writes various emails with information about the possible project to the rest of the partnership. They also phone two other partnership members to talk about how to frame the project when presenting to the group.

Eventually, the worker presents the information to the other members in a partnership meeting. The partnership discusses the project and asks for clarification on various details and defer the decision to the next meeting. There, the worker presents the case again and it's decided to fund the project.

Afterwards, the worker reflects afterwards that actually they felt as if they were the one to take the decision to fund the project, and only looked for a nod of approval from the residents in the partnerships to take the project forward.

## Types of decisions

We noted that, within decision-making processes, different types of decisions were included in each phase and how often the processes of making decisions combined these types (see table 1). Indeed, it is important to consider how we define and understand a decision. We spoke to many partnership members who said they made all decisions in official settings, such as partnership meetings or emails. Most of our research participants considered the big and final decision determined by a formal vote as the most notable or important part of the process. However, the smaller discussions by messages, informal chats or phone calls were mentioned more fleetingly as unimportant or as unrelated to the decision-making process. Many did not recognise the micro decisions or conversations that happen before the vote as significant to the outcome. This is crucial to note because if we want to transfer

power into communities and ensure that residents are a part of decision making, we also need to be aware of the many facets involved in the process and those involved in them.

We noted that the non-recognition of a decision could have implications for the process's outcome. For example, if three members discussed what time to have a partnership meeting via WhatsApp and agreed on a suitable time and then proposed this to the rest of the group, they would have already made a small decision implicating the decision-making process. Another example could be the chair of the partnership putting together the meeting agenda and deciding to omit or postpone a discussion on a particular topic.

The examples below demonstrate that different types are used interchangeably throughout processes and these are not always straightforward or continuous.

### Example 1

Demonstrates **taken-for-granted** views of decision making, beliefs that most decisions are **overt** and **non-recognition of decisions**, assuming conversations happen mostly/always at formal meetings.

 Well, the chair's pretty good. He doesn't let people natter on and on, you know, he keeps them in their place. And they just toss it backwards and forwards, often times, you know, it will be, has health and safety been looked at first of all, for activities and stuff. And then, well for the kids anyway. And it will just go back and forth and it will be agreed. And anyone that thinks anything other will voice their [opinion], people aren't scared to object or say what they think and it's generally sort of tossed in the air like a ball and comes down as a decision."

(Big Local worker)

### Example 2

Shows **iterative** decision making, and recognition that some decisions are taken before partnership meetings.

 We meet as a separate committee, and then we meet with the partnerships as well, once a month. So, we've got that alignment with the partners, so that... but the committee meets first. If there's anything that's brought up in that [...] group with the partnership that they can then answer. We've already got those answers, and we've made those decisions prior."

(Big Local worker)

### Example 3

Demonstrates **overt** decisions taken in meetings and by email, and **non-recognition of decision** from informal discussions on WhatsApp.

 Most decisions are made in [partnership] meetings, or in emails that follow those meetings, so we might occasionally kind of discuss something briefly on WhatsApp and then say if that's agreed can we switch to email to leave an email trail. Because we need to evidence this for whatever to show that's what we decided. But that's quite rare, it's normally in the [partnership] meeting and then following the meeting by email."

(Big Local worker)

**Table 1: Decision-making types**

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<b>Overt</b>	A decision that is agreed to by a majority of the group, where all members can assert their choice openly and directly.
<b>Private/Hidden</b>	Two or three members talking among each other during a meeting, discussing the decision before the official voting occurs. Or members talking with each other by messaging, phone or video calls to agree on a decision before the broader meeting.
<b>Formal</b>	Taking a decision using a previously agreed method or structure, such as voting, polls and decisions noted down in meeting minutes.
<b>Informal</b>	A decision made without previously agreed methods for decision making and in a casual manner. This could include the whole group or parts of it, and could be either hidden or overt.
<b>Taken for granted</b>	Use of phrases such as 'that's just how it is' or 'it's just democratic', or showing a sense of believing that 'this is how things have always been'.
<b>Iterative</b>	A decision is discussed at a meeting and deferred to the next meeting for members to consider in the meantime. Or a separate group discusses a decision before it is brought to the larger group.
<b>Non-recognition of decision</b>	Discussions occur that members do not consider to be decisions or part of decision processes. For example, conversations on a WhatsApp group or Messenger group where micro decisions and 'unimportant' matters are discussed that may contribute to future big decisions.

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## The grey space between formal and informal decisions

Decision-making processes often rely on formal processes and bureaucratic procedures to legitimise the final outcome. In the context of Big Local partnerships, this is evident through the emphasis individual members put on the final, overt vote, which follows the rules and procedures they have created for decision making. The partnerships we spoke to all had rules and regulations relating to how they make official, formal decisions, particularly about funding. Some used the concept of 'quorum' to determine whether a decision can be made and to verify that the decision was valid. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a quorum as "the minimum number of members of an assembly or society that must be present at any of its meetings to make the proceedings of that meeting valid". Local Trust does not give any guidelines that would require such procedures, but most areas have applied their rules and regulations to track their spending and decisions. We discuss this further in section four. It is also generally accepted that democratic procedures determine formal decision making. One of our participants, a resident and co-chair for one of the partnerships, described a decision where she was not happy with the outcome. However, due to the procedures in place, she felt she had to accept the status quo. The decision related to funding a large organisation, which she thought didn't need the money. Those in favour had presented a view that funding it might function as advertisement and visibility for the partnership, and the majority of the partnership board subsequently voted yes. She described that the final vote outnumbered her wishes and democracy prevailed.



I still have mixed feelings about it, but [...] the good thing is we are able to – even if we get outvoted we still so have our say, but that's it, that's what it's about isn't it? And that's what democracy is. And if you're outvoted you accept the vote and you move on. Get on with it, go right, okay, we lost that one, let's go with the next one, or you're outnumbered. It doesn't become an issue dragging on, the subject is then closed, and we move on."

(Big Local co-chair)

In his book, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (2015), David Graeber argues that bureaucratic procedures are accompanied by the threat of legal consequences, which makes bureaucratic processes attractive even if they hinder creativity. In capitalist societies, we have grown used to procedures of accountability and perceived transparency, and these transpire even in the absence of rules. The belief that decisions are made mostly through overt and transparent votes creates reassurance that nobody will be held accountable if the decision is 'wrong'. It is likely that partnership members are reluctant to recognise smaller decisions as real or as impactful, because it would also hold them accountable to them.

This idea of transparency and accountability also has a significant impact on how power operates in Big Local partnerships, and indeed in any organisation. West and Sanders (2003) criticise the tendency in global businesses and institutions to make 'transparency' claims, that is, to suggest that power operates in the open and is visible. They suggest that often practices around transparency in fact obscure power. For example, in the Big Local context we noted that in Area E (see appendix B for details of areas), they employ an external minute taker to record all meetings and display these on the website. In Area A and B, they record Zoom meetings so there is a permanent record of decisions made. And Area D hits the record button as soon as members go to a vote. All of these transparency practices lead to an understanding by partnership members that only recorded and minuted discussions are real decisions, thereby obscuring the (un-recorded) processes that lead to the formal votes.

We noted that most of the decision-making processes that were considered formal were taken more seriously and required more accountability. However, iterative and informal decisions were not considered to require this level of transparency. So, how do we determine what is a decision, and especially one that is important enough to be recorded? Or perhaps the question we ought to ask is, **who** chooses which decisions are formal, and **when**? For example, consider the example of the resident co-chair above and her thoughts regarding funding a large organisation. Imagine what decision-making processes happened before it went to a vote in the partnership meeting. Did those in favour have personal relationships with the funder? Had they already discussed the matter before the meeting?

In another area, our research participant described how to take efficient decisions. They had to be strategic in how the proposal was put forward to the rest of the partnership, which meant accruing networks and connections – or 'social capital' (Bourdieu, 1986) – and court popularity among the group.



Terry McNamara



**For effective decision making it was necessary to have a good strong hand before you play the cards. You have to know, or have a good inclination as to whether other people on the board were before you made an arse of yourself and bought in a fresh project that people just tore apart, and then you couldn't bring it back because it looks like you're having two bites of the cherry. [...] Decisions weren't made in the room; they were made before. You had to take into account people's input but decisions are usually made before."**

(Big Local worker and resident)

What we can see from these examples of decision-making and the complexities involved is that there is power within the definition of decision and the transparency (or lack thereof) in the process. One or several individuals have the power to take small, hidden, iterative and informal decisions that shape the eventual outcome. Therefore, we need to consider what factors influence a person's ability to be in a position to guide decision-making processes. Perhaps those with more time to make informal conversation about a potential project, or those paid for their time, have more traction. Or those with more social capital in the community could navigate the decision-making processes. We discuss the importance of considering agendas and the impact of social capital in the following section on rules and agendas.

## Summary

We have considered how decisions are more than a moment in time; they are a process that often extends over time and include informal, iterative, hidden and overt aspects. Power is often embedded in the unrecognised parts of this process. Although a partnership may consider the final vote as the most important part of decision making, power resides within the entire process that leads up to that point. In turn, the surrounding organisational culture and how members of a partnership think about decisions, informal conversations and other actions involved influence the process and are also important to consider. The way that power operates, therefore, is not always open and visible.

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# 5. Partnership rules and agendas

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## Key findings

Our research explored the formal ways of organising action within partnerships. We found that although Local Trust does not give many rules for partnerships to follow, partnerships nonetheless develop structures that become embedded in their practice and activity.

- Rules and regulations are mostly made by members and workers in partnerships, and tend not to be questioned or changed over time. There is little explicit discussion of rules and policies in the data we collected from Big Local areas. The taken-for-granted acceptance of rules and formal structures we have uncovered may constrain the work of Big Local partnerships unnecessarily. In contrast, clear plans and objectives are helpful reference points to guide activity and assess decisions.
- Uncertainty about a partnership's rules and what they mean sometimes causes confusion in meetings. Confusion may have a chilling effect that prevents people from participating, which in turn inhibits some ideas from developing.
- Meeting agendas are open in principle, but through what is seen as the norm or because of differing levels of engagement, chairs and workers tend to create them. Agendas shape which decisions might be made, and as a taken-for-granted practice, they can also conceal power relations. In practice, the chair or workers often have considerable control over how agendas are presented and the space given to different topics.
- Free-flowing discussion or free space within meetings can stimulate broader conversation and ideas.
- It is vital to consider the pace of meetings. How meetings are run, for instance, by speeding things along or slowing them down, has implications for participation.

This section focuses on some of the formal structures that shape decision making and the informal processes operating alongside them. We found that although it is not a formal requirement, each of the partnerships involved in this research had developed terms of reference, constitutions, policies and other rules that inform how they act. Sometimes these rules take on a life of their own. When we examined the use of agendas for meetings, we noted numerous examples of workers and

residents collaborating on common goals, supported by Big Local reps effectively and transparently – thereby building shared meeting agendas. At the same time, some politics at play show key figures seeking to retain power over agenda-setting, both at the level of meetings and partnership priorities. This involves behind the scenes meeting preparation and tight control over the meetings conduct. These practices have implications for the distribution of power in decision making.

## Rules and regulations: In mind and on the page

### Meeting vignette: On rules

The meeting was going at quite a pace. It had opened well; the style friendly and inclusive. The chair had been held up and after canvassing for other volunteers, the Big Local worker took the on role herself. "Where would you like to start?" she asked. She had explained that there wasn't an agenda as there was just one issue to discuss – the organisation of this year's AGM. There were many ideas and enthusiasm, which were clearly valued because the worker chairing the meeting encouraged free-thinking discussion. There was a strong commitment to accountability, wanting to share the projects Big Local supported with the wider public. The AGM structure and content began to take shape around showcasing this activity. Then came the first sticking point and discussion came to a halt.

They suddenly realised the implications of holding the event online. It posed a challenge: how to handle voting for members, ensuring that everyone who could vote online was entitled to do so (they were local residents). Discomfort and frustration resulted, but also uncertainty as to which way to turn. The Big Local rep was concerned that the terms of reference were unclear, but she held back from offering advice at this stage. Steering group members said, "it's up to us" – a principle in tension with the rules they have put in place.

The Big Local rep encouraged the partnership to find a way to accommodate their terms of reference and ensure a good outcome regarding the steering group's composition. There was a reference to a previous incident when someone was voted off the steering group due to a form that allowed voters to choose between retaining a member or not. The unintended consequences of direct democracy, perhaps? Eventually, they agreed to sidestep the issue by retaining people on the steering group for an additional year given the unusual circumstances of the pandemic. Instead of a formal AGM, the meeting would instead be an annual review. There is more freedom to act than people seem to have realised. They can just decide to do this. They can even change the terms of reference; the Big Local rep reminded the group. They seemed surprised by this. A review of the terms of reference was put on the agenda for the next meeting.

Overall, there is little explicit discussion of rules and policies in the data we collected from Big Local areas. These are instead a kind of 'background presence' that often operates in unnoticed ways. Another way of putting this is that rules are often imagined or assumed even when they are not directly discussed, and they matter for how people think about what they can do. We became aware of a complex relationship between actual and imagined rules, beliefs about

if and how they could be challenged or changed, and established ways of acting about them through our observations. The discussion of rules is tackled explicitly in the above illustration. This powerful example brings to the surface some tensions or uncertainties about the role of regulation in the partnerships more broadly. In other words, we think this example reveals 'the invisible effects' of the law in the thoughts and actions of ordinary people' (Chua and Engel, 2019, p.339).



Terry McNamara

How rules, regulations and the law are part of our lives, whether or not we think about them, is captured in a concept socio-legal scholars developed called 'legal consciousness'. It refers to how "people experience, understand, and act in relation to law" (Chua and Engel, 2019, p. 336), but does not rely on their explicit knowledge or awareness. Indeed, people operate within "taken-for-granted understandings and habits" which arise from their experiences of rules accumulated over time (Sibley, 2005, p. 324). This can even include accepting rules and regulations that do not deliver what they promise or assuming there are rules that prevent them from taking action.

We draw on this notion of legal consciousness to help us recognise that there is sometimes a gap between formal rules and the lived experience. It may be that people act in ways that are not aligned with the rules governing their area or 'as if' specific rules applied to

them when this is not the case. A further piece of the picture considers that legal consciousness is 'relational' (Chua and Engel, 2019, p. 345). It means it is fluid and changes due to interaction with others. We see this in the meeting space when the rep reminds everyone that it is unnecessary to have a quorum as it is only a planning meeting. At that moment, the regulation enshrined in the terms of reference is brought to life and mind, as people figure out how it fits with their understanding. It ends up requiring more explanation, and then everyone resettles.

In Table 2, we disentangle elements of beliefs and understandings about rules and the action associated with them based on the illustration of the meeting presented above. This is a valuable framework for analysing the role of rules in partnerships more widely. And it draws attention to the meaningful relationship between what people believe and how they act.

**Table 2: The role of rules and the scope of possible action**

<b>Beliefs and understandings</b>	<b>Actions</b>
<b>Assertion: There need to be rules</b>	Belief in existence and necessity of rules and structures; commitment to rules as democratic mechanisms to contain and permit operation of power
<b>Recognition: What are the rules?</b>	References to rules – actual or believed – as a starting point for action
<b>Knowledge: Who knows the rules?</b>	Refer to Big Local reps as a source of knowledge about rules. A sense of ‘us and them’, referring to Local Trust as holder and restrictor of knowledge.
<b>Practices: How are the rules shared?</b>	Informal circulation of knowledge; formal documentation; key individuals possessing valued knowledge
<b>Limitations: We probably can’t do that</b>	Reference to rules as restrictive – real and imagined
<b>Obstacles: The rules are fixed</b>	References to rules as unchanging and impossible to change
<b>Malleability: the rules can be changed</b>	References to other Big Local groups and how they operate and the Big Local programme’s design/flexibility
<b>Status quo: This is just the way things are</b>	Habits and practice that may be in line with or at odds with the rules
<b>Agency: ‘It’s up to us’</b>	Our decisions can change or trump the rules

Developing specific rules and regulations to support decision making in Big Local partnerships often occurs through assumptions about the right way to operate. Local areas may rely on the existing knowledge of individuals who offer what appears to be relevant expertise from other settings – an instance of ‘knowledge as power’. In the following example, a partnership member with a professional background in public service developed terms of reference and members valued his knowledge, although some considered the approach to be heavy.

of Big Local. The Big Local partnership criteria refer only to the minimum number of members and the proportion that are residents. Local Trust also asks that partnership members are representative of the area. It goes on to state: “As long as you meet these criteria, your partnership can take different forms and should be designed to best suit your area. Each partnership can choose their name and structure and the process for people to join the partnership.”<sup>4</sup> Residents, as in the instance below, have a markedly different perception.

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 **Our processes – [one] chair that we had who set up a lot of [processes] was a former civil servant. He [...] wrote the terms of references, eight pages, so he was very document and process heavy. So we’ve been left with that and it’s kind of got softened I think over the years. [...] he was comfortable in that zone but [...] no one else was really.”**

(Big Local worker)

Interestingly, some members of different partnerships believe they must abide by general guidelines that are imposed on them by Local Trust, even though this is not accurate. Again, it shows ‘legal consciousness’ where there is a gap between beliefs and reality regarding the necessary regulatory framework

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 **I think [...] in some ways Big Local gave autonomy in a different way, so although its processes and its tick boxes and its checks and balances were really top-down, prescriptive, and laborious, you gave the community the most boring thing to do. You took the passion from it, then put in the heavy processes. Does that make sense?”**

(Resident member)

There are also references in passing in the interviews to frameworks that guide action and demonstrate engagement with them. This includes a policy review, which must be approved as a guide to future action, and proposals judged against the ethos of the area and the codes of the local population.

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<sup>4</sup> Partnership criteria are: “It must have at least eight members; The majority (at least 51%) of members should live within the Big Local area’s boundaries; Members should broadly reflect the range and diversity of people who live in your area – for example, in relation to age, ethnicity, gender, faith, disability or income levels. Please note that we ask members of the Big Local partnership to participate ‘in their own right’, which means they cannot represent the views of any other person or organisation.” From Local Trust’s website.

## Whose agenda? Organising meetings and agreeing topics for discussion

Along with terms of reference, constitutions and policies, the meeting agenda is a formal document that plays a major role in Big Local meetings. When we asked during our interviews if groups have agendas for meetings, a common response was 'of course, we do'. They see them as normal or natural: "It comes naturally from the work you're doing. That's the agenda" (Big Local worker). The second of Lukes' (1974) faces of power is concerned with setting the agenda, which shapes the context and constraints within which decisions might be made. Agendas also conceal power relations as people are inclined to take agenda-setting for granted. So this is a key aspect of recognising how power operates in Big Local partnerships.

Normal practice for Big Local meetings includes having a standard format of items for discussion, carrying them forward from one meeting to another, and including items that have emerged in the interim, for instance recorded through email exchanges, which seems straightforward. However, there is a certain momentum that gathers in these processes. Ideas gain traction and a sense of inevitability as one thing leads to another – a process that social scientists call 'path dependency' (Ghezzi and Mingione, 2007). Certain decisions emerge as credible or legitimate as they chime with a social group's dominant values and formal or informal commitments. The ways in which decisions are made at one point in time shape how they can be considered at another, and it may become normal to explore some options and not others.

Agendas usually include some or all of the following items: introductions (and welcome to new members), apologies, declarations, finance, policies, hub update, report on activity, presentations, voting on decisions, any other business (AOB). Partners widely accept that designated members of the steering group, mostly chairs and co-chairs, are entitled to create agendas. This is often a positive experience, but it nevertheless reveals the hidden face of power as members accept the chair's right to shape the discussion. The right may arise from trust that "the chair will know that there are these issues that are relevant" (Big Local worker), but it is open to exploitation. In practice, we heard many accounts that all agenda items were routinely accepted, "never rejected", "unless it was something completely daft". It is striking to note that this is not a widely used freedom and some workers say they wish this happened more.



**You know, in six years I don't think [...] I'd be able to count it on one hand the amount of times that actually a partnership member has said, can you add this item to the agenda, this kind of thing."**

(Big Local worker)

In the areas where we undertook this study, most accepted the need for formal standard agenda items, but also appreciated the kind of open-ended discussion that the AOB item allows: "AOBs [is] always the best bit, isn't it?", comments one Big Local worker. However, the way some members talk about space for open discussion suggests an underlying sense of us and them among the meeting participants.

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**W** Any other business is their chance to bring up any issues that are close to their hearts. Anything that they'd like us to do. Any comments they've got on what we're doing. And they're not [...] backward in coming forward to offer their opinions. If they think we're doing something wrong we will hear that they think we're doing something wrong. Which is - in my job - absolutely wonderful. I may tut and roll my eyes and go 'oh back to the drawing board', but that sort of feedback - well that feedback is just invaluable because I know what direction then to take for things I'm doing."

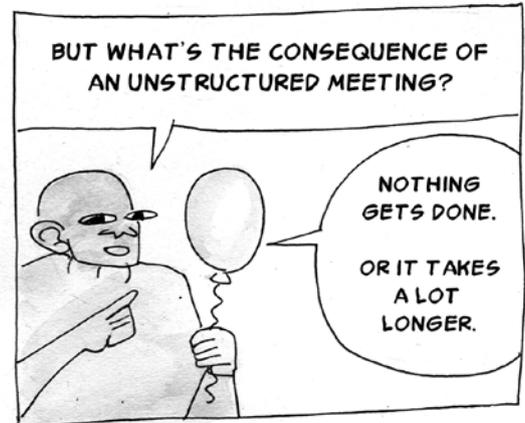
(Big Local worker)

In some cases, there is an appetite for taking open discussion much further - perhaps as a deliberate tactic to unsettle power? Agendas, especially when used in online settings, do not always stimulate conversations, as we discuss further in section seven. "It is conversation (as well as being in a room together) that stimulates ideas (Big Local chair)". In the example below, it was the "first time there wasn't a pre-set agenda" with free-flowing discussion since meeting online. This created an opportunity for sharing ideas for the future but also recalling past experiences. The appeal of a free thinking session is to generate ideas rather than replace more structured meetings for decision making. In effect, this shapes the projects or activities that come to the table for decision in the future.

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**W** A recent steering group meeting had no agenda, and everybody responded really well to it, because in the steering group you've got all different walks of life - different age groups, different character types. It's a real, really healthy cross-section of the community, and some of those people were well versed in Zoom calls and meetings and agendas and minute taking, and standing up and speaking and that kind of thing. [...] And when we had this one without an agenda, because it was like a free for all, I think the people who didn't normally speak felt less intimidated, and because if you have this agenda structure it will exclude some people who are not so familiar with it, whereas if you have no agenda structure it kind of encourages everybody. And everybody came into their own and a lot more voices were heard, and we heard from people that didn't really speak that often usually, the quieter ones, and in that sense we kind of mentioned that today, and acknowledged it, and said going forward we should have more meetings without an agenda, where we just sit. [...] It might be awkward for those who need that chop, chop, chop kind of structure who are like, right, two minutes, come on, let's, you know? But it really helps, and then you get this natural conversation, and the passion really comes out."

(Resident member)



@ CHARLOTTEMLBAILEY

Despite everyone having an opportunity to add items, not all topics are given the same importance. Chairs and workers have the power to shape the tone of discussion and thereby direct decision making. Some members emphasise their 'strong commitment to transparency' while others recognise the power of their role: "But the chair would have influence over the things that they want to be highlighted and raised" (resident member). In the first example below, we might interpret the first example of a worker below as a case of 'providing leadership for' others (Pearce, 2013) in a way that is transparent and accountable. In the second example, resident members of the steering group have organised to defend residents' ideas against the potential criticism of agencies.

**“Certainly, proper discussion on all the things is allowed, and in fact we have a separate committee meeting before the steering group to actually iron out any issues that we want to address. So like be prepared, because obviously at the main steering group there's agencies as well. But by having a pre-steering group meeting we're aware of any potential discussions at agencies.”**

(Resident member)

**“So, I will sort of shape that discussion because actually I'm the one that needs to kind of know it and I need them to start thinking about what they want me to do over the two years. [...] So really I define it but it's the sort of thing that emerges logically itself. It's not me going 'oh this week, this month I want to talk about this'.”**

(Big Local worker)

In other instances, we heard accounts of chairs going much further in their roles and deliberately using their power to achieve certain outcomes, even to the point of undermining the meetings' participatory principle. In one case, a worker spoke frankly about preparing the ways for securing agreement on ideas to be proposed at a meeting "so they were more inclined to vote for it". He goes on, "It took me a good six months to learn how to develop that [support] and how it was necessary to speak to people behind the scenes." And stronger still: "So those few things, how well you talked to people behind the scenes, how well you are willing to take on feedback. Those are the things that seemed to really affect decision making." Finally, he spells out what this amounts to: "Decisions weren't made in the room; they were made before. You had to take into account people's input, but decisions are usually made before."

Overall, those who chair meetings have a difficult role. They appear to feel a tension between making space available for discussion and sustaining focus. They are aware that meetings “could get derailed quite easily” (Big Local worker), and some have experiences (including outside Big Local) “where people have tried to run off with their own agenda” (resident member) and set priorities that do not meet all the community’s needs. Formal documents and agreements can help to keep discussion and activity on course: “So we’ve got a plan, we know what we want, this is in the plan, we’re doing it because the plan was agreed.” (Big Local worker).

### **Managing meeting agendas in practice: the pace and politics of decision making**

In the final part of this section, we briefly consider the ways in which the pace of decision making is experienced. We identify three contrasting dynamics: ‘time pressure’ where decisions are rushed; ‘slow-motion’ decision making, which some feel takes too long; and ‘taking time’ to make decisions well. In section seven, we discuss the relevance of different platforms – such as Messenger or WhatsApp – for decision making, including how online working has facilitated a fast turnaround of decisions in particular. Some interviewees comment on their sense that that too little time is a barrier to communication and participation. For them, it feels as if a meeting is simply a space in which they are expected to agree or disagree. There is no time for discussion, for sharing ideas and asking questions, which can lead to people appreciating different points of view, even changing their minds. As one resident member comments:

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 **I just feel like, just people are rushing. People just kind of won’t do it, go through the agenda. So yes, not enough time to discuss it, I think.”**

(Resident member)

This quote and experience chime with people expressing a wish for less formality in discussion and wanting space to feel connected and a sense of shared values rather than efficiency, as we already heard about the attraction of no-agenda meetings. However, slowing down does not necessarily stimulate participation. On the contrary, some people experience slow-motion decision making as tiring, causing them to lose motivation to participate. It’s the inertia of bureaucracy that people appear to dislike most when things are “done in a very sort of civil servant-y way”, which “was really putting so many people off” (resident member). Residents especially find such formal and drawn-out decision-making processes “boring and stagnant”, possibly intimidating (resident member). They do not believe their time is well spent engaging in them, especially as decisions “can take days or weeks” to arrive. The following quotation captures this frustration.

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 **A young woman came to two or three meetings and she said a few bits. And then she said, oh I can’t – I can’t be dealing with this, she said [...] ‘Why does it take two hours just to say that’, do you know what I mean? It’s like I can’t deal with it, she said.”**

(Resident member)

However, compared to the perceived slowness of council processes, with “so much bureaucracy to wade through”, some interviewees appreciate the possibility of making decisions promptly and with good outcomes. In the following example, rules include a quorum for making decisions outside meetings that allow them to act swiftly while remaining accountable.



**Sometimes, if I need a quick decision from somebody, I will text board members [...] We have things like a small grants programme, [...] so that it was agreed by the board meeting that just four members can decide on the small grants programme. It can be different trustees, so as long as four of them come together to meet. But sometimes, you know, in the world that we're living in now, we have to do that via email or just text message or just [a] phone call sometimes, so we can make quick decisions if we need to.”**

(Big Local worker)

## Summary

In this section, we have explored the place of rules and regulations in operation and imagination. We have worked with the concept of legal consciousness to recognise that there is often no neat fit between the rules that people believe should or do shape their decision-making processes and those in place. We have then explored the role of the meeting agenda as a specific tool and site of contest over power. We have uncovered impressive examples of inclusive practices, as well as uncomfortable reports of chairs overstepping their roles and losing sight of the Big Local ethos. In the final part of the discussion, we explored what this means in practice regarding the pace of meetings. We now turn to a more detailed consideration of the partnership members, including their diversity and the recruitment practices that bring them on board.

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# 6. Membership, recruitment and diversity

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## Key findings

To ensure inclusivity and participation, we must consider partnership members' protected characteristics, such as their race, gender or class, and how these intersect to create layers of disadvantage. We have seen how partnerships make significant efforts to be inclusive and encourage participation from different parts of the community. However, hidden discrimination still takes place. There are barriers to involvement within partnerships, even if some may be unintentional and reflect the obstacles that exist in broader society. For example, who is recruited, and therefore represented, within the partnerships is in part determined by those who already hold power within the community.

- Diversity is both perceived as positive and a challenge for partnerships. Issues of diversity and inclusion that exist in broader society are also prevalent in the Big Local partnerships.
- Race and ethnicity provide the greatest challenge: avoiding uncomfortable information about others is an example of wilful blindness.
- Several characteristics remain under-addressed or acknowledged, including class, gender, different types of disability and how these affect meetings' accessibility and the possibilities of participation.
- Recruitment can end up relying on members' social networks, which prevents diversification.
- Mindful focus and reflection on issues that might prevent diversity help partnerships from being more inclusive and allow more voices to be heard.

To further understand how decision making takes place in Big Local partnerships, we need to consider who is 'at the table'. This addresses important questions of opportunity and inclusivity. This section starts by exploring partnership members concerning the identities and relations of race and ethnicity, class, disability, sexual orientation and gender.

Following this, we analyse the values, ideas, experiences and beliefs that move people to engage in Big Local and characterise their work. We then focus on recruitment to the partnership and other committees, and the characteristics – both of the group as a whole and individuals within it – that others value.

ISSUES OF RACE AND GENDER ARE TABOO TOPICS TO AVOID MAKING MISTAKES.



### **Intersectionality: How race, gender, disability and class impact decision making**

'Protected characteristics' are characteristics identified and protected by equality legislation (Equality Act 2010), including age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. Although we discuss these characteristics as distinct, it is important to recognise that they intersect and interact with one another, producing different levels of inequality. Intersectionality, a concept originally introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, allows us to consider how inequalities and issues of systemic discrimination occur due to a combination and accumulation of these characteristics. Often, issues of race and gender discrimination, for example, are taboo topics that many avoid discussing to ensure that they do not make any mistakes. All our research participants were adamant that they wanted to do the right thing and be as inclusive as possible, and indeed many partnerships took steps to

do this. However, we know from research into disadvantage that discrimination can often happen in hidden and unintentional ways. For instance, by creating an environment where certain aspects of a person's identity are overlooked through such as not considering what people's pronouns might be.

'Wilful blindness' is a term coined by Margaret Heffernan (2011). It refers to the cognitive dissonance and processes people (usually those in power) experience. These prevent them from seeing or facing things that they should know but do not, as it makes them feel better not to know. As anthropologists Bovensiepen and Pelkmans (2020) put it, it means "shutting out uncomfortable information" and leaving certain things unquestioned, possibly as a strategy to maintain the status quo. It takes energy to challenge inequalities and go against a situation's momentum. Understanding wilful blindness and being open to the possibility of challenging one's blindness may help partnerships to make issues more visible and foster opportunities to challenge intersectional inequalities.

In our research, we noted that partnerships often spoke about diversity as something to be proud of or aspire to. However, even if the will is there, partnerships face the same obstacles in broader society. Having representation from a wide range of people in a partnership can help to question the taken-for-granted norms of who should occupy which roles. **Intentional** representation around the decision-making table (virtual or not) enables participation. Diversity can mean different things, but it meant having multiple perspectives at the table for the research participants to whom we spoke. As one resident member reflected, “we don’t want the same faces” in the partnership. Other members echoed that having a good mix of individuals led to a balanced perspective, as a Big Local resident from a BAME background describes below:

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 **As far as I’m concerned, the politics will always be played out at the table. And politics in a democracy is determined by numbers, so anybody who has that kind of an issue to some extent, would need to ensure that the diversity of the table [...] has a greater balance.”**

Awareness of differences and how to incorporate them were evident in partnerships who already had a diverse representation in their group. Partnerships that considered themselves to have a diverse representation of minorities in their meetings worked well, but only if people supported one another and were unified.

### Example of positive inclusion

In this partnership, the chairs, workers and resident members had made conscious efforts to have a partnership board that includes different protected characteristics, as well as different personality types. Partnership members mentioned feeling proud of being inclusive and diverse, even if this sometimes caused disagreements. One member said, “that’s our strength if you like. The fact that we are so diverse, but we all go for the same aim”. Diversity of members’ experience was also valued highly as the following project coordinator highlighted:

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 **Like life, everyone’s got completely different roles and backgrounds, and that’s what I like about our group because it’s a real diverse [mix] - motivations from different people, different empathy, different experiences. And I really like that we’ve got people in business, we’ve got people that volunteer, we’ve got people with disabilities, we’ve got - and sometimes it can actually be quite frustrating, because everyone’s got a different [laughs] viewpoint. But it’s also really refreshing, so you - like [a resident member] - she always comes from a very different angle and is quite often different to everyone in the group. But actually - and the group’s very respectful of that and they step back and they go, OK, and I think it needs that, it needs a different view.”**

(Big Local worker)

## That's the way it goes: On not accepting the status quo about ethnicity

Whereas some partnerships reflect consciously on the intersectional protected characteristics of their members, others do so less. Phrases such as “that’s just how it is” from members sometimes reflect acceptance of a non-diverse partnership, a feeling that there is nothing to be done, or that they’ve tried every avenue to form inclusive and diverse partnerships. For example, one resident member from a majority white partnership said, “We’re all white, we’re all just heterosexual, you know, and that’s the way it goes”. On the other hand, many participants reported no issues regarding protected characteristics, such as a vice-chair who said, “It’s very non-judgemental. There’s nobody [who is of] lesser importance than anybody else, we’re all equal”.

Some areas acknowledged they might have issues and made allusions to challenges. As one Big Local worker explains, “I think it’s a friendly space where people shouldn’t feel restricted by – even I’ve got protected characteristics, but I think there might be cultural things happening ... and I’d like to tease that out a bit more”. But for members with fewer protected characteristics, it appeared difficult to know how to broaden recruitment or facilitate participation from community members with protected characteristics.

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**I suppose being what might be called the privileged, white, middle-aged male, you know, I sort of win on every characteristic, and I [...] would hope that those things don’t get in the way of any of our meetings. [...] I don’t think we have any from**

**ethnic minorities, but then there are very few people from ethnic minorities in the area. It’s a very white area. Whether people are gay or straight – well, some I know because I know the people involved. But I don’t think that comes into it at all, and I’ve not heard anybody advocating for, or against things, on any of those bases. [...] Maybe I’ve been better able at putting myself forward because I’ve never had to face those sorts of issues, you know. And maybe I’d be less reluctant to put my opinions and my voice forward if I were part of a minority group that’s traditionally found [it] difficult to do that.”**

(Partnership member).

Another resident member mentioned that she felt the partnership was white simply because it reflected the partnership area, not because there were any under-representation issues. But then she suggested that it was because people experience a lot of racism and racial abuse generally in the community. That would be why more diverse community members did not get involved in the Big Local. She reflected that perhaps some might not be comfortable sitting around a table with “a load of white people” when they already live in a community where they don’t necessarily feel welcomed. Another member discussed similar issues in the partnerships, which reflected broader sociocultural divides in his local community. For example, he was keen to recruit more members of the Bangladeshi community where he lives, but he said, “I’ve actually been told, to my face, we don’t want to be part of it because we’re not part of the community”.

Occasionally, some members from a BAME background in partnerships found themselves called upon to comment on specific issues that reflected their personal experiences and characteristics. One resident member remarked that during meetings when there is something related to “Muslim or Arabic content... my background or culture, I need to tell them what’s acceptable and what’s not, or how to approach [it]”. Our observations reflected this, when during one meeting, the (white) chair called upon two of the members who were from a BAME background (who had been predominantly silent throughout

the meeting) to comment on Ramadan, as well as their experiences of being women (and mothers). Although being asked for specific contributions can feel good for members, as the resident member above remarked, it can also cause complex feelings. They may then become a spokesperson for particular types of lived experience. In turn, this can cause a feeling that one’s identity is being reduced or that one is required to draw from difficult experiences to satisfy others’ curiosity. This issue is widely discussed in studies on race (Villanueva et al., 2019) and in other areas, such as mental health (Byrne and Wykes, 2020).



Andrew Aitchison

## Vignette on race

In this partnership, many participants talked about race as an issue. Historically, they had difficulties with a majority white board representing a partnership area that was mostly Asian. One member, who comes from BAME background explained that some time ago, the board was white and there was “no mention that there should be brown people on the board as well”. At recruitment, the white candidates were being accepted, but not ‘brown’ candidates. The member tried speaking about this with someone from Local Trust, who agreed this was a problem, but said they didn’t know why the dynamics played out that way. Subsequently, members attempted to change this by recruiting more people of colour onto the board. They were aiming for a board more proportionally representative of the area, but they experienced challenges and some resistance to these changes. In the end, some people left the partnership. Of this experience, one member remarked:

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**W** ...you kind of pick up very quickly that you need to be twice as good to kind of protect yourself from criticism. You need to be on it all the time. That’s why it’s – you know, you don’t have the same kind of flexibility to be making mistakes like a person of the majority population ... So I’m very careful to make sure that everything we’ll do [is] right. But yet still I’d be criticised.”

Later in the interview, the same member remarked that the comments about ethnicity tended to stick and “hit home”:

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**W** ...[...For] the past two years I’ve been dealing with these comments. They stick to you, don’t they? [...] not to belittle and I don’t know if it runs [to] a comparison, but like sexism in the workplace. If there’s one arsehole making one nasty comment at you, once a year, and then someone else does it in the following year, it hits home, doesn’t it? It’s like ... sexism. I guess it’s something like that.”

They mentioned the work it takes to work through these comments and it can be hard to work alongside someone in the partnership who has made a racist comment unless there’s forgiveness or some sort of healing process.

We heard one example where a person who had experiences of racism (outside Big Local) found it difficult to participate and resigned. Reflecting on this, other members commented that this particular individual had brought their hurt, issues, and negative experiences to meetings and this had become a struggle for everyone. These comments and difficult experiences reflect the knowledge of the impact of racist microaggression and structural violence on individuals; the pervasive, repeated and daily experiences of racism (including verbal, visual or non-apparent), which contribute to stress and negative mental health outcomes (for example, Solorzano et al., 2000, and Embrick et al., 2017).

Although overt racism is less visible in partnerships and members are mostly very eager to 'do the right thing', there are still issues we can confront. Sometimes, doing the right thing is to challenge normalised behaviour and take active action to ensure inclusion. Some partnerships had excellent recommendations and suggestions about how to do this (which we have incorporated into our report recommendations below). One partnership, for example, offered interpreters to people with English as a second language, although they found that not everyone feels comfortable using an interpreter. And, in the same area, they found speaking to people face to face was the best way to recruit more of the Indian population to the board.

## Dealing with difference: class, health and gender

Being inclusive involves taking active steps to recognise potential barriers to participation. Although our research participants expressed few direct or explicit opinions on class regarding participation and engagement in partnerships, there were undercurrents of how class intersected with other circumstances that we can tease out from their comments. One member spoke positively about relationships between members of different classes, highlighting that they felt the partnerships were places where people came together:

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 **I see it in my daughter's school. Where middle-class, high earning parents have the same problems, the same challenges, the same issues, and actually sometimes bringing the two together on volunteering [...], I don't know, I think the world's full of beautiful, amazing people. And sometimes they just need to be put together in a way that makes it work."**

(Resident member)

Another resident said simply, "We're all working class, but that's not an issue". More participants commented on broader socioeconomic issues they faced as individuals and communities, which could act as obstacles to participation, and limit the capacity to scale up to Big Local. Several participants spoke about how levels of deprivation and poverty exacerbated by austerity interacted with individuals' mental or physical health, producing feelings of resentment, jealousy and suspicion regarding partnerships, funding and spending decisions.

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**“ On these estates you do have a high level of mental health [problems]. [...] It’s about accountability. They don’t want anyone looking too closely because they’re paranoid with the[ir] mental health, they’re terrified of getting their children taken away. They just live with a lot of maybes, and ifs and buts, you know.”**

(Resident member)

Interestingly, when one member tried to say their community was in a so-called deprived area, they experienced intense hostility from local residents and neighbours. There is a fine line between pride and recognising disadvantage.

Certain characteristics are not visible but have a significant impact on a person’s ability to engage and be included, such as disabilities or personal circumstances about health, which some interviewees shared and were unknown to other partnership members. In one area, participants discussed how a former resident member had left the partnership because they felt their voice was not heard. In this case, residents tried to support that member by showing them in meeting minutes where their input had influenced decision making, but this was not enough for the resident. In another partnership, we observed one member with learning difficulties who struggled to speak or to notify the chair that they wanted to contribute to points made, even if other members spoke openly about how they make many efforts to be inclusive of this person in meetings and decision making. Enabling meaningful and inclusive participation is not simple.

The COVID-19 pandemic and resultant socioeconomic crisis have had a significant negative impact on mental health. Although attitudes are changing, those experiencing mental ill-health may remain quiet about it because of stigma. We found some positive cases of members fostering inclusivity around members’ mental health struggles. For example, one member experienced mental health problems at the start of lockdown and wanted to step down from Big Local, but the others took on the extra responsibilities and told them to take a break. They assured the member that the role would be ready for them when they could return. In this example, they came back after a few months and appreciated the support from their fellow members. In another area, a member who experienced quite severe mental health problems commented that they felt they had “a chance” to speak up in meetings and were encouraged to give their input via direct questions. After each agenda item, the chair would repeatedly ask, “any input on this idea, any input on that, any input?” This enabled them to feel like they had a voice consistently.

On gender, most of our participants referred to whether a partnership meeting was male or female dominated as a measure of equality. However, references to gender were often made in a jokey tone, indicating that it was not an issue – or revealing discomfort about discussing it. We also noted that no individual or area mentioned any involvement by trans or gender binary/fluid members.

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**“ I don’t see that as an advantage or disadvantage, it just does, yeah. So I don’t feel, oh, they’re not listening to me because I’m black, you know, a black female; there may be misogyny or racism. No, no, no, we’re not like that at all.”**

(Resident member)

## Recruitment of partnership members

To understand social hierarchies in decision making within Big Local partnerships, this part of the report analyses how status, class and power relations are reproduced during meetings and informal preparations for decision making. An important way this happens is through connections – what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls ‘social capital’ (Bourdieu, 1986). The term refers to the volume and density of relationships people have to those in power. There are different recruitment practices among Big Local partnerships. They range from more methodical and formalised recruiting methods, such as advertising positions and formal interviews, to members who just ‘fell’ into positions and those who friends approached. Some people started at Big Local in one role then moved to a different one, often described as a natural or organic process. One member began as an administrator but ended up “doing everything”, so they became a project manager by “natural progression”. Procedures also differ depending on whether roles are paid (Big Local workers) or voluntary. Many areas had more formalised procedures for chairs, including application procedures and interviews. Some chairs were put forward then voted on (elected from within partnerships).

A few chairs and Big Local reps mentioned that resident members were unsure or unconfident or did not know how to apply, even though when they asked to join they were accepted. One chair mentioned, “just chatting” to partnership members and “encouraging them to do it [join]”, whereas another chair said how hard it is to recruit “raw residents” – people that have not done community volunteering before. Indeed, one resident member remarked that, “only (already) empowered people come onto the board”. Some areas acknowledged that despite having formal

procedures, member recruitment often relied on social networks or word of mouth. Members in voluntary roles spoke about “just chatting” to a rep who encouraged them to join, for example, because they felt there was a need for representation from a particular gender or background.

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 **There’s formal recruitment, so there’s posters, there’s leaflets, there’s a website, there’s all the social media – Instagram, Facebook. But there’s huge community networks and a lot of the message goes word of mouth. So, a lot of the volunteers emerge out of community networks or out of networks of friends, which is really good, it’s really organic. And ‘cos a lot of the groups are focused on developing community spirit as well, like the [...] community allotment, and they have this social aspect as well as delivering a project.”**

(Resident member)

People acknowledged age and retention as barriers to recruitment in many areas. They mentioned young people as difficult to engage in the operation of partnerships, and as one Big Local chair noted, even when they did recruit young people, they were “the same, the usual suspects, head boy of a school, someone who’s on a student council, someone who’s engaged in a mentoring programme. These are all persons who are receiving positive sanctions for their conduct on a daily basis”. He also noted that young people from deprived backgrounds, in particular, are harder to engage and to encourage to commit: “I’m talking about changing an environment and a community, and you need to look at those people who we consider to be deviant who wouldn’t necessarily want to engage with us”. One area noticed lots of younger people recruited since COVID-19. In

contrast, others noted more dropouts and **less** recruitment during COVID-19 (they mentioned higher physical and mental health problems during this time, which acted as barriers to participation) and the extra struggles of those with caring responsibilities.

Furthermore, younger people may not have the experience to feel comfortable expressing themselves and communicating. One resident explained that she thought younger people did not stay at the meetings because the partnership “did not know how to communicate” with them. Additionally, she remarked that due to the historical relationships of members, there were “too many arguments”, and that someone should have taken the younger people off to one side to explain the background and context to arguments, so they were not put off. One Big Local worker discussed difficulties in engaging young people without prior connections to the partnership:

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**“ I think coming into a group that’s clearly a group of friends who know each other, if you’re not one of them – so, someone who’s just moved to the area maybe doesn’t know very many people yet, and that could be an issue. And I think if you would point that out to them, they will say, “Oh, we will welcome people.” And I think they would try to. But for them as well, I think, it would be difficult to get over the fact they’re all a bunch of mates [...] But I still do think that there are emotional barriers for anybody coming into an established group. And it’s not just [this area]. It’s anywhere. And it’s always going to be. That’s what neighbourhoods and communities are like.”**

Energy and commitment are inevitably needed to broaden participation in partnerships. When we asked our research participants a final interview question: “If you could change anything about how the partnership operates, what would it be?” most answered that they would like to recruit more people into the partnership, particularly young people, even if this felt tiring. Existing partnership members did not always want new recruits to rock the boat. One chair remarked: “I like to see new faces joining. But, yeah, so long as people are willing to be involved and keep going forward and keep sticking with the principles that we’re working in.”

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**“ There can be a tendency with resident-led partnerships, in my view, to go, ‘oh we’ve tried to get everyone involved and we’ve tried to get other people to join us, but no one’s interested’. And we’ve done it loads of times. Whereas my push back on that is always, there’s no such thing as apathy, it all ends on what your offer is. Whether your ears are open to what local people want. So, I think there’s always a way to test the methods you’ve used to try and engage with people.”**

(Big Local chair)

Many participants talked generally about types of people they would value in their partnerships. People who understand governance (that is those experienced in consultation and engagement processes, for example) were considered appropriate figures for leadership positions. Leadership skills for organiser positions in general were highly valued for swift decision making. Other comments echoed that proactive people with their “fingers in the community” would be good at being on boards. They also considered “someone who is

confident, speaks with a sense of authority or passion”, people that “genuinely care” and are “empathetic” with “emotional intelligence” as valuable members. These characteristics had to be balanced with others. But as one participant remarked, they must understand emotion and “not let their views impact the running of what we’re doing”. Some members felt that Big Local encouraged certain types of people and kinds of working: “I heard on the grapevine that a Big Local was being set up and they’re interested in getting people from agencies as well, to try and help the procedures”. Another resident member felt that he was a successful candidate because of his professional experience, commitment to his community, and the fact that he “won’t get bullied or pushed around”. Members did not value aggressive ways of communication, including rigid thinking, and laying down the law, nor those who were perceived to use the partnership for their own agendas, such as putting money into their own businesses or gaining political power.

## Summary

This section has explored partnership members’ characteristics, how others talk about them and what this might mean for inclusivity and participation. We have seen how partnerships make efforts to be inclusive and encourage participation from different parts of the community. There is further work to do to fully consider intersectional protected characteristics, such as race, gender, age, class and disabilities, as many individuals will face hidden discrimination and other barriers to participation which could be better understood. Additionally, who is recruited, and therefore represented, on partnership membership boards is determined by ‘social capital’ and potentially by those who already hold power within the community.

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# 7. Participation in decision making: voice, power and inequality

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## Key findings

At times, dominant voices exercise power **over** others in meetings. Other people show deference and respect to them and appreciate how chairs, for instance, run meetings and get things done. At the same time, there is frustration and recognition that this contributes to inequalities in participation. People sometimes feel silenced, and that others do not always welcome their views, notably when they do not express them in what others deem the right way. Yet there are also numerous examples of creative and original gestures of inclusivity that make a tangible difference to how participants feel – and, we imagine, a difference to outcomes of decision making.

- Dominant voices are useful in running meetings and keeping the discussion focused. This style may be effective for making things happen but sometimes does so at the cost of others' participation and inclusion.
- Silencing mechanisms include meeting styles and formats. For example, always adhering to the same agenda may discourage free conversation and inhibit ideas.
- Ways to facilitate all members' participation include creating space for listening at regular points during meetings or preparing materials in an accessible way..

Power is brought to life in practice. It is also where it comes into view. Our observations of meetings allowed us to witness how power operates in live social situations in Big Local partnerships. In this section, we explore how meetings happen through the idea of 'voice'. In the context of online meetings, how people speak and what they say is all the more important given that the screen's framing and distancing effects minimise other aspects of communication, such as body language and gestures. Considering voice allows us to pay attention to who speaks at meetings and who does not and how they interact with others. We differentiate between different types of voices – from

the dominant to the quiet – and how meetings operate to make it possible for people with different styles to speak or be heard. Finally, we examine how people use their voices in live situations and critically examine practices that alienate others, especially those unused to these settings. Our approach builds on the discussion in section five, which revealed valued characteristics among partnership members and some of "the power relations which create voices" (Arnot and Reay, 2007, p. 312). We also take inspiration from the Our Bigger Story (2020) animation Big Local Voices: reflections on change and power in Big Local, which captures residents' experience of power and voice.

## Dominant voices and not hearing others

Some individuals in Big Local partnerships tend to dominate discussions. From section six on membership, we learnt that some members undervalue the potential contributions of others – and may not, therefore, be inclined to give them airtime. At the same time, the discussion on agendas in section four highlighted the contribution chairs and workers could make to effective leadership **for** the good of the area. If the impact of the Big Local Programme is to be achieved over the longer term, it is essential to build capacity in the present by talking **with** rather than **over** – in a parallel to seeking power **with** rather than **over** others (Pearce, 2013).

According to Stephen Lukes (1974), the first 'face' of power is the behaviour and authority of one person (or persons) who explicitly exert power over others. You can see this in practice in some Big Local meeting discussions. Workers and chairs often make statements in favour of participation: "We don't want anybody to dominate a meeting", as all those present shares a common purpose. However, sometimes this is difficult to achieve. Some have a strong sense of entitlement to speak, but this is often derived from their contribution or accumulated knowledge over time "because they know more about the organisation and the ins and outs of everything". Some workers reflect that they have "lots to say" because they are "out there doing the work" but that not everyone appreciates their efforts to share their understanding of "what's going on". They don't always get the balance right. For example, according to one rep, the chair of a partnership was "really quite upset" when he had mocked him for dominating a meeting, saying the meetings were like "the Greg show" (pseudonym). The rep agreed

this was fair criticism, as the chair had "given a huge amount above and beyond to the programme".

Entitlement to speak is not only claimed by chairs and other figures but 'granted' by steering group members who accept the hierarchy of the meetings where participants have different statuses: "Well, the chair is probably the most dominant, but then he has to be, doesn't he?". This is similar to the power relations we uncovered in the discussion of agenda-setting, where status confers power and legitimacy to wield authority, both what gets onto the agenda and how people discuss it. Participants show respect or deference to people skilled in running meetings while counting on them to perform their roles well. Chairs are expected to maintain the focus of discussion and keep others in check or 'in their place'. In practice, whether or not everyone's voice is heard is "usually dependent on how switched on the chair is that day, and how capable the chair is in making sure everyone who is wanting to have their voice heard, does have their voice heard". Getting the balance right is not straightforward – and can take time, as in the example below.

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 **But also, those who had already had their say and had plenty of time were basically shut down after they'd had their say, so they couldn't repeat the same thing again and again. And dominate too long of the meetings. Some of our meetings went to three hours on a Thursday evening; it was exhausting sometimes, um, but yeah. So yes, everyone – thankfully, I can say from the most part, everyone on our board had their own say."**

(Big Local worker)

In talking about meetings we either witnessed for ourselves or heard about second-hand, interviewees referred to what they assumed to be common knowledge or shared understandings of how people **should** operate at community meetings. These understandings are guides to making sense of what is going on around them and are helpful for us all. But at times, the versions of the world we believe in can blind us to other, perhaps more troubling dynamics. In some of the accounts people shared with us, there was a view that dominance and powerlessness could be explained by confidence, personality or “just the natural selection” or depending on people’s personal confidence.



**But I think kind of noticing that acknowledges that there are these differences and that if we want to help people who – it might sound negative if I say dominant voices, maybe I should say confident voices, or positive speakers or something like that. It’s not a negative thing, it’s just the natural selection, it’s just the way things go in conversations.”**

(Big Local worker)

We turn to a complex exchange that shows how dominant voices are not always powerful voices, contrary to what we were expecting to hear from our interviewees. Indeed, to exercise power through voice, the speaker must do so in a valued or recognised way. Otherwise, they risk being interpreted as too loud to be heard.

### Interview vignette: power and voice

Big Local worker: “Yeah, the majority of them [partnership resident members] have worked in a previous life, or they’ve had some contact with working in community groups and working with professional partners. So they [...] have that innate behaviour, whereas the people who perhaps have not had that experience, they can be the ones, I suppose in the lower – I hate to say this, but it is that demographic of non-working benefit claimant person.”

Carin (project researcher): “You mean that have less of a voice maybe in those meetings?”

Big Local worker: “No, they have more of the voice.”

Carin: “They have more of the voice, OK, yeah.”

Big Local worker: “It can be the ones that are really, I suppose... it’s not domineering, I’m looking for the right word. But they certainly voice their opinions perhaps more strongly, and perhaps not delivered in the right way all the time. The delivery hasn’t got that finesse. So therefore, what tends to happen is they just talk over people all the time, and they don’t listen to the responses to make an informed decision.”

This revealing moment arose in an interview when Carin was talking with a partnership worker. The worker refers to the “innate behaviour” of the professional who has learnt the rules of the game about conducting themselves at meetings. In sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s terms, they have cultivated their ‘habitus’, so they feel at ease. The speaker then draws a contrast, with some awkwardness and stereotyping, between steering group members with this kind of professional experience and ease and those without. Carin anticipates that the latter group, those without the ease of the professional, will have less of a voice at the meeting. Still, the interviewee surprises her by stating that they can also dominate. Then the interviewee judges that they do not do so appropriately. This is an uncomfortable revelation. They think they do not deliver their opinions “in the right way all the time” and are without “finesse”.

This matters to the interviewee, who perceives these members as problematic for not listening or learning from others. There is an issue of recognition in this dynamic: views are only heard if expressed in the right way, but the meeting’s culture determines what this is and whose voices count. This exemplifies where those with greater social power impose norms of conduct on others and fail to recognise the difference. In this instance, at least participants voiced their views. In another partnership, an interviewee commented: “Education comes into it, you know, certain people just don’t want to put their head above the parapet for feeling that they’ll say something wrong, or it won’t contribute, yeah?” Although, as we discussed in section five, explicit recognition of class is rare, ideas about class and entitlement to speak are relevant during meetings.



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### Quieter or silenced voices?

Some people speaking – especially those with dominant voices – can have the effect of silencing others. In the example below, the worker and chair take too much of the meeting time “rattling on” so that when other people’s contributions are invited, it is too late to stimulate participation. This may be about how meetings are structured. This recognition dawns slowly as the interviewee comes to appreciate the dynamics of more dominant and quieter voices.

“Everybody has a chance to speak. I think it’s just, it’s one of those things that I didn’t really think of until it was done differently. And then we noticed what could have been improved before that we weren’t seeing, and that was this thing where the dominant speakers are the dominant speakers. Maybe that can be helped by the structure. [...] I thought they were going pretty well, and I just thought that these are the quieter people. But then, you know, every once in a while one or

two of the quieter people might speak up and say, just throw in a real gem into the conversation and like, wow, blown away, because they wait a long time to speak but when they do it really counts.”

(Big Local worker)

It is important to recognise that people’s voices emerge as dominant or quiet in **interaction** with one another. The sociologist of education Basil Bernstein talks about the “yet to be voiced” (1990, p.30). This helps us hold onto a sense of the potential contributions of all partnership members. Indeed, as one Big Local rep comments: “I think everybody gets listened to if they open their mouths, but not everyone opens their mouths”. There were many examples from the interviewees’ accounts where people commented on the value of quieter people’s “brilliant ideas”. Sometimes, quietness is taken for granted or perceived as a matter of choice or personality. This common belief doesn’t recognise the importance of interaction, context, knowledge as power or how relations of class, gender, ethnicity and so on shape participation.

Gender was not widely remarked upon except in terms of the proportion of men and women at meetings (see section five), which contrasted with our own observations. Although in some partnership meetings, women were at the helm and lively and active participants, in others they played a back-seat role, often remaining silent, or quiet, or only contributing after more dominant members had spoken or taking part in the final votes. In one case, the two women present in a meeting only spoke when the (male) manager had left the Zoom meeting. Their actions could have partly been due to the men holding manager and chair roles and therefore having more to contribute initially. However, our observations suggest that the two women's confidence improved and interactions opened up after the manager left, when there was no obvious leadership but space for reflection. These micro-level everyday encounters really matter for how participation is realised or inhibited. Gendered responses, such as men being more vocal in meetings, are commonplace in wider society and it is important to consider that this is likely to be the case in Big Local partnerships, too.

We observed some instances of people called upon to speak, especially to speak **for** others of the social group to which they are perceived as belonging. We heard of one example of this in section six where the chair only asked specific directed questions at residents when he wanted to hear about a particular aspect of their experience, in this instance, two residents who were both mothers and Muslim. They were not given direct opportunities to speak or contribute throughout the rest of the meeting – an instance of voice as 'tokenistic' where inclusion is superficial and limiting.

Silence may signal a refusal to participate on the terms offered (Kanngieser, 2012). Sociological theories of emotional labour – that is, the work that some people have to do on their emotions to maintain the

comfort of others – may also help us understand different forms of participation. Evans and Moore (2015) note that the 'emotional management' of people of colour in white institutionalised spaces leads to "emotionally hazardous spaces" in which people of colour often choose to remain silent, especially regarding experiences of racism. They note that "people of colour carry the **burden** of having to choose between tacitly participating in their marginalisation or actively resisting racist ideologies with the possible consequence of institutional alienation, exclusion, or official reprimand" (Evans and Moore, 2015, p. 452). They must find other ways to navigate these spaces of exclusion and cope emotionally with the burdens of microaggressions, which may include remaining quiet or not speaking up about their experiences in fear of causing 'trouble' or hurting their colleagues and peers (DiAngelo, 2011, on white fragility). This results in the acceptance of people of colour, women or those with disabilities of being 'normally' quiet or non-participating.

We saw and heard of instances of people not being at ease speaking in formal meetings during our observations and interviews. In section five, we discussed the significance of agendas as instruments of power. We hear below what this means for different voices being heard, and it is clear that formal meetings lead people unfamiliar with these settings to speak less than they might otherwise. Sometimes a lack of participation is connected to the difficulty of taking part in a meeting without being well prepared for it. If participation relies on onerous preparation, however, this is a further obstacle to it. Not everyone has the time or inclination to work their way through meeting papers and documents. One Big Local worker effectively argued that documents need to be written in the right voice to communicate effectively and sustain participation, stating it was like "pitching the level for your audience".



Yemi Akade

**“ Others they’re – this is the first experience they’ve had of that, and they’re much quieter, and much less confident to speak, and if you present the kind of stereotypical meeting with an agenda to these people it can make them go a little bit quiet. [...] You end up with some dominating voices, and some quieter people who are in the room and not really having the chance to speak.”**

(Big Local worker)

Finally, the issue of presence at meetings is fundamental for participation in decision making and it is not easy to ensure (see also the discussion about recruitment in section six). First, most participants are volunteering their time and energy and are often juggling other commitments. Although we do not have more general data on meetings’ schedules, many take place towards the end of the working day – such as 5pm or 6pm – times

incompatible with the care of young children. Second, the aim “to get more people involved than the usual faces” is complicated in communities that may be tired of previous government-sponsored initiatives leading to “a community that has long given up and been downtrodden and dormant by failed regeneration and top-down politics and community projects”. As this speaker continues, it’s hard to get away from the idea that “we’re going to do this to you” and residents are sceptical of new initiatives relying on their participation. At the same time, active partnership members are frustrated, and interpret absence as deliberate non-participation with little sympathy about the consequences for others: “People who turn up make the decisions [...] so people do whinge and bleat about ‘oh well I wasn’t even here so’. Well that’s your problem, you should have turned up to the meeting.” (Big Local worker). In this context, online meetings can be positive for inclusivity, something we discuss further in section seven.

## Taking part and listening out for others

In the discussion above, we shared accounts that are critical of dominant speakers. We explored processes of silencing in meetings and obstacles to participating in them. The aim is to openly explore power's operation as we witnessed and recorded it. However, alongside these dynamics, there is enormous creativity and respect in what partnerships members do to foster environments where "people are prepared to listen". They cultivate practices and dynamics that enable non-hierarchical decision making and non-dominating power (Pearce, 2013). Furthermore, they create spaces and atmospheres of inclusion, which we discuss in the following section. We witnessed examples of positive inclusion, such as genuinely creating small spaces for checking-in along the way at meetings. In our observation notes, we recorded frequent interventions, such as: "Does anyone want to add anything at this point?", "Is that something everyone wants?" and "I could ask on behalf of the committee with your permission. Does everyone agree with that?" Examples of inclusion also included recognising where an intervention had not been appropriate: "Sorry, I didn't mean to stop the flow there". It could also be collaborative, where members look out for each other, noting when somebody would like to say something. Furthermore, partnership members recognise the importance of cultivating their capacity to listen as part of the ethos of resident-led decision making and the importance of including quieter voices to ensure good outcomes.

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 **You have to actually make time for people who are just being very quiet and have maybe got the right answer, at the end of the day. If you don't include them you've possibly made the wrong decision."**

(Resident member)

Getting things done requires having the power to act. But for the activity to be resident-led and community-owned, it takes what one Big Local worker describes as a "long-running conversation". In the following example, power is put to work in the community's service. It involves holding back from acting and explicitly recognising the importance of listening and standing up to threats to the decision-making process's integrity.

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 **So yeah, getting power really helps. I think a good, consolidated power base in leadership is a good thing. But you have to be willing to let that flow down and let people run with their own ideas and their own projects and initiatives. And then you use your power to be a safety net for them [...] I don't mean to get too philosophical here, but you use your power to serve the wellbeing of the board on the area. So when [...] someone with power and authority says, 'you better fund that community centre because she's a friend of mine', you've got the whole board behind that saying, 'no, we don't think so'. And I think that's - if you use your power effectively like that, without pissing people off, without being selfish with it, then that's where the power thing comes into play itself. The kind of - that's where the value of the power is, not in getting your own projects approved and stuff like that, that's seen as petty, and it'll backfire."**

(Big Local worker)

Big Local reps and workers play a very important role in the decision-making process and endeavour to help partnerships “find common voices, or one voice, to be able to engage with that kind of more strategic debate” (Big Local rep). We found through our research that Big Local reps mostly hold power, but choose not to use it unless necessary, or if called upon by residents. Reps’ level of involvement also varied in the different partnerships. They work with members to think through the consequences of proposals and prepare for meetings, drawing on their experience of project delivery since “we don’t want them to take a terrible decision”. Crucially, they place emphasis on giving people “all the information they need” rather than seeking to influence them. However, this is also complex, especially if the protection mentioned in the quote below means avoiding exploring certain ideas. That said, the relationships between Big Local reps, workers and residents are important opportunities for learning and collaboration. In contrast, the second quotation below recognises that autonomy and capacity building can also emerge from an apparent absence of such leadership in a genuinely resident-led moment.

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**I know Big Local’s tagline is we think people in communities know how to get things sorted. They don’t always. That’s the truth of it. You don’t always. So, you’ve got to share your experience. It’s my job to identify the pitfalls really, I think, and protect them.”**

(Big Local worker)

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**“So the rep that we had happened to be sick at one particular meeting, and I think that allowed actually people to kind of, say, ‘right, come on, we need to get ourselves together here and we need to get organised’, and actually start leading ourselves rather than the rep necessarily leading those meetings. And from then so it seemed to go quite quickly.”**

(Big Local worker)

## Summary

At times, dominant voices exercise power **over** others in meetings. Other people show deference and respect to them and appreciate how chairs, for instance, run meetings and get things done. At the same time, there is frustration and recognition that this contributes to inequalities in participation. People sometimes feel silenced, and others do not always welcome their views, notably when they do not express them in what is deemed ‘the right way’. Yet there are also numerous examples of creative and original gestures of inclusivity that make a tangible difference to how participants feel – and, we imagine, a difference to outcomes of decision making.

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# 8. Spaces of communication and decision making

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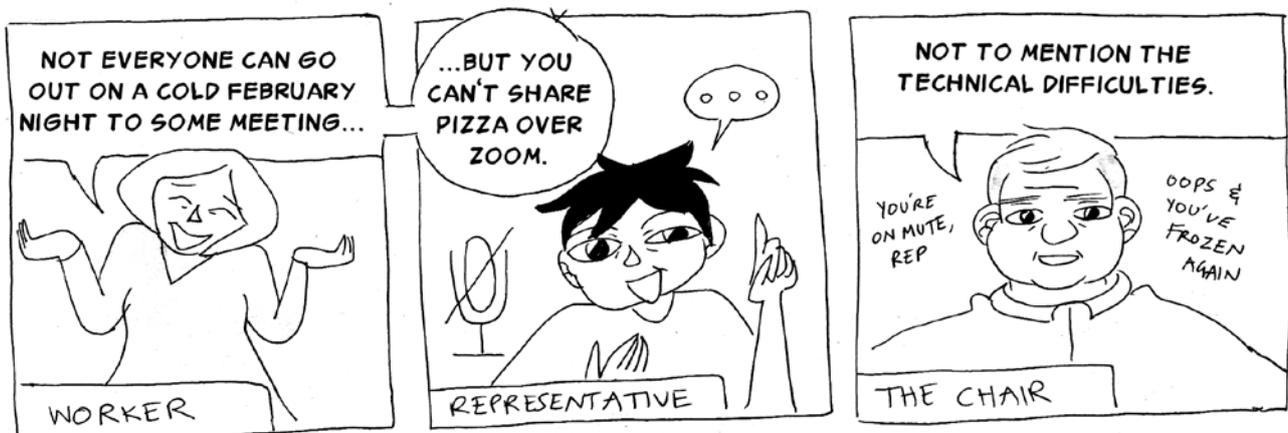
## Key findings

We examined what or who motivates and inspires active involvement and how this happens informally and online. Understanding informal power structures and organisational culture is key to understanding how groups work when making both small decisions and wide structural ones. Some partnerships use group messaging or social media for communication about decisions, and others communicate mostly by email. In pre-pandemic times, they often took such decisions over a cup of tea, which has implications for each group's atmosphere, culture and functioning. In an increasingly digital world, understanding reasons for digital inclusion in decision making is vital. Digital communication has advantages and disadvantages concerning participation and decision making and, therefore, the operation of power.

- Digital poverty and digital exclusion affect partnerships for in-group and out-group communications.
- It is essential to consider the space and atmosphere of decision making, both face-to-face and online. Allowing time for humour and informal conversation can boost participation and shape cultural identity.
- Partnerships are navigating participation in virtual meetings via Zoom, with significant obstacles. Most have found that Zoom has a way of making meetings more effective, but this also leaves less time for informal and unstructured conversations.
- Different mediums of communication hold varying degrees of legitimacy for decision making. While some groups find email a professional way of taking decisions, others consider Zoom meetings more reliable.

For most of the members and workers of Big Local partnerships, most decision making would have previously taken place in-person at local community meetings, at the partnership's hub or designated space. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced these meetings online, consequently affecting how and when they make decisions. The partnerships have gone through a period of rapid change that includes getting

used to new technologies, ensuring digital access and inclusion for all members and learning how to occupy and function in a virtual space. A new virtual space and the absence of a physical one have also had an impact on how partnership members communicate with each other outside meetings.



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## You can't share pizza on Zoom: Organisational culture in pandemic times

Local Trust fosters an overarching culture of the Big Local programme, promoted through events, newsletters and internal communications. However, each of the partnerships also has its own organisational culture, which influences the 'taken for granted' procedures of decision making, as we discussed in section four on agendas. A partnership's 'organisational energy' (Jones, 2006, p. 170) motivates members and ensures commitment and participation. Many of our research participants mentioned the importance of physical space to create a sense of community and belonging that grows out of sharing a packet of biscuits with a cup of tea and "having a laugh" together (see Jupp, 2007). As one participant noted: "You can't share pizza on Zoom". Meetings in a virtual space remove some of the informality that encourages participation.

Nevertheless, the partnerships have found various ways to maintain social interaction and sustain loyalty and commitment to the group during the pandemic. For example, the partnership that used to have pizza in their meetings now say they imagine the pizza to be there and laugh about pretending to eat it. In our observations of partnership meetings, many talked about times when they used to meet in person, expressing narratives of a shared past and memories of 'normal' times. Such narratives can help to maintain cultural identity throughout a period of change, but as Garcia-Lorenzo (2004) notes, they may also restrain cultural identity by **guiding** collective historical recollections. It means that repeating stories of a shared past might also shape the present culture of the group, and limit the way they do things. For example, as we discussed earlier regarding the status quo, this includes assuming terms of reference are unchangeable, because that's how things have always been.



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### On the importance of just popping by: Informal space and atmosphere

The partnerships we spoke to considered and reflected how to make space for informality in their new virtual ways of working. Some recognised a relaxed atmosphere and humour was important in meetings to relieve tensions and allow people to speak freely. Others spoke keenly about maintaining a professional atmosphere to get through the agenda efficiently, and perhaps even preventing chit-chat from taking place in meetings. A Big Local worker said she found it difficult to connect with the community during the pandemic, as they used to rely heavily on people “popping in” at the community hub to talk about concerns in an informal setting.

**W** I found that one of the benefits is you get to know the people, you get to understand the people more, especially during these times – of what’s floating the boat, what’s making them happy, what’s making them unhappy? And if they’ve got any concerns or issues, it’s done in a non-work format, you know, how, one of the things we talked about was how [we are] finding this lockdown, and all my team are really struggling. And that’s what’s prompted us to do these informal Wednesdays [within the LTO team], because that lack of contact, communities are always out face to face, we thrive on that, we thrive on [...] some of that emotion and that banter. And we weren’t always finding that on the Zoom, because it’s work [...] and you get your job done and off you go.”



**[At the community hub] ...we'd have a list of things that we need to do in that day, and by five o'clock [...] we probably only done about two of them, because the idea of that is people come in informally, sit down, they have a cuppa, we chat to people, and then they'd go. Somebody else would come [...]. What we have done is we've been talking to people - that's important. So, that was brilliant for that because people would just wander in and sit down, grab a cuppa, grab a biscuit, grab a cake, or even sometimes go and get a butty, have their lunch with them, and that's exactly what we wanted that hub to be."**

(Big Local worker)

Humour is an essential part of organisational life that we can use in multiple ways, such as releasing tension or tentatively exploring new territories of conversation (Linstead, 1988, p. 123). Tone of voice, facial expressions and body language can easily be lost in the virtual environment. Therefore, important cultural codes and deep understandings (Geertz 1973) are compromised when meeting on Zoom. Despite the pandemic, partnership members have still found communicating methods in person, which in normal times would have been their way of linking up and maintaining contact. Informal encounters on street corners and popping by the corner shop still hold importance in reaching out to the community and communicating among partnership members.

The local community hubs play a vital role in communication, particularly pre-COVID, but also during the lockdowns. In some of the areas, partnership members had a chance to meet face-to-face when

handing out supplies at their Food Bank. A Big Local resident explained to us that a vital part of feeling together was to pop into the local corner shop, a partnership member owned and ran, and have a socially distanced conversation. Another member said chatty residents, who know of their role in the Big Local and want to share views, still accost them by the bus stop. They also gather input and ideas from residents on street corners as they go about their daily lives. Another person mentioned meeting other board members by the local running track commissioned by the Big Local, a community focal meeting point, just so he could walk around the tracks and have a chat.

The atmosphere of a partnership meeting, encounter, inhabited or virtual space is easy to overlook, but it plays an important part in how power relations are played out. Anthropologists have argued that atmosphere is how we interact and engage with the world, our so-called "affective engagement" (Schroer and Schmitt, 2018, p. 1). In other words, atmospheres are produced (Bohme, 1993, p. 116) through different interactions and activities. In turn, they set the tone of conversation and participation. Atmosphere affects the collective experience; even if an individual member feels emotion, it sets the mood of the room (Anderson, 2009). We learned from this research is that the shift from face-to-face to online has significantly changed the atmosphere of meetings where decision-making takes place and also altered some of the power dynamics. Atmospheres can impact the individual, and individuals can affect the atmosphere. It is important to consider this since the partnerships have had to undergo rapid and transformative change over the past year, which has altered their ways of functioning as a group and challenged their existing power structures.

## Navigating online spaces

We have learned from the partnerships that virtual spaces can generate inclusion and exclusion. We have seen inventive use of communication to assemble new ways of interacting; when the technology isn't there, when technology fails, or if somebody dislikes a particular communication medium.

Frequency of communication varies greatly between areas and members of areas. For example, one area only meets as a partnership every two months on Zoom. Another meets twice a month, once with board members and once with the whole partnership group. This

also means that partnership members must communicate in between meetings somehow, and the methods for this differ between groups, mostly depending on their level of comfort with platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, email, text messages and video-conferencing (Zoom and sometimes MS Teams), and commitment to the work. Paid workers in all areas communicated more frequently with each other than resident volunteers. The amount of communication also depended on personal relationships and how long they were involved in the partnership. Most partnerships also had an in-group or core group that met and communicated much more frequently.

### Example 1: Active technology users

In this partnership, the locally trusted organisation (LTO)<sup>5</sup> and workers meet nearly every day and work together on projects by having Zoom on all day long. They also have an active WhatsApp group sharing hundreds of messages each day. Another WhatsApp group with the rest of the partnership board members was used much less frequently. Zoom decisions are seen as 'not quite legitimate' and are sometimes backed up by email votes.

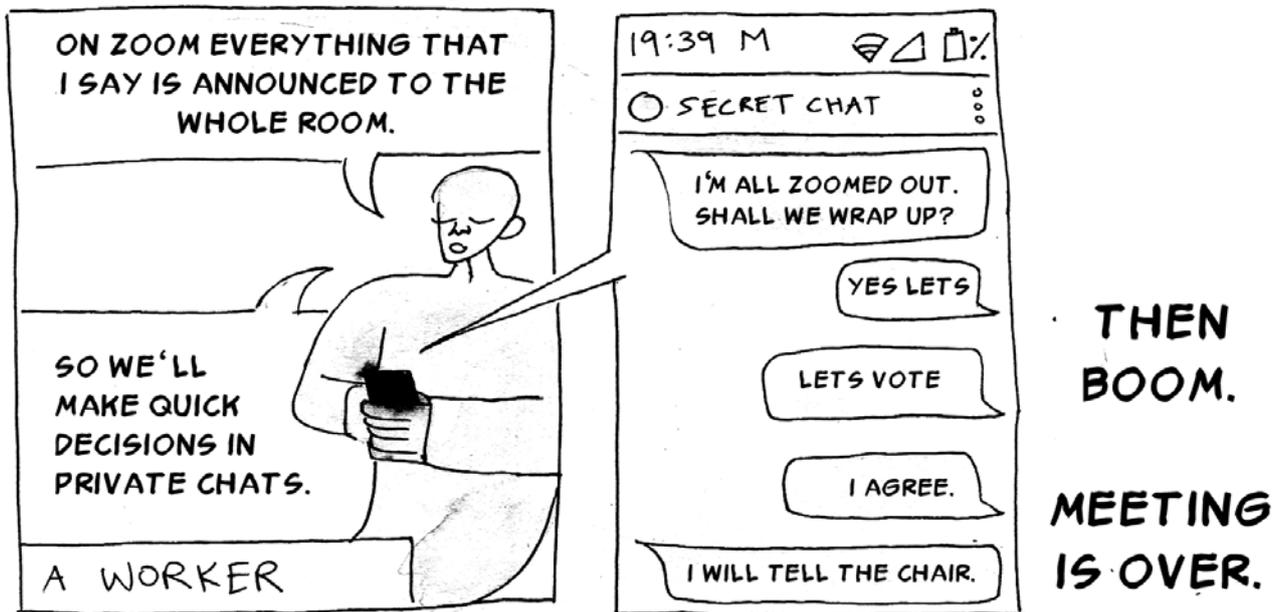
### Example 2: Dispersed technology users

The worker, the LTO and the chair in this partnership meet on Zoom several times a week, sometimes every day. The in-group of dedicated volunteer residents are friends and talk on the phone often. The partnership has a Facebook Messenger group where everyone but one of the members communicates weekly. The person who doesn't have Messenger gets updates by phone from the worker if they have discussed something important on the Messenger group. The partnership also has small sub-committees for specific projects that meet separately.

### Example 3: Sporadic technology users

This partnership is getting used to Zoom. They have a Facebook page where they post things for the public, but it is not used frequently. Meetings are held monthly by Zoom, although with technical difficulties and less participation than normal. They communicate by email and phone outside meetings. The worker talks to the chair at least weekly, and also updates individual members when needed. Some members struggle with access to technology and find this inhibits participation in meetings.

<sup>5</sup> A locally trusted organisation (LTO) is chosen by people in a Big Local area or the partnership to administer and account for funding, and in addition may deliver activities or services on behalf of a partnership.



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## How does Zoom affect participation?

Local Trust has provided partnerships with Zoom licences, and consequently, most groups use the platform for online meetings. Adapting to using Zoom continues in all areas. For many, it is used in their professional and personal life, too. Proficiency in working out the required technology varied greatly. It ranged from people struggling to turn cameras on and unsure of how to share their screens (example three, sporadic technology users) to people using Zoom as a 'virtual colleague' in the background for most of their working day (example one, active technology users). Most research participants were positive about Zoom generally, despite its challenges, mainly as it has been the only means for continuing work in the partnership areas. Some have considered continuing with Zoom in the future, for example, for sub-group meetings, people who cannot attend due to travel distances or difficulties in access, weather conditions, health or disabilities. However, most agreed that it should not replace

face-to-face meetings, especially since there are significant limitations to its use, such as the lack of humour, banter, private conversations and informal chit-chat.



**Because with Zoom, you don't have people gathering around the coffee pot, you tend to have the business of the meeting, so it is slightly more formal. But people are still obviously friendly and chatty within the meeting. But it is no replacement for face-to-face meetings.**

**Everything about the chat has to be announced to the whole group rather than a little chit-chat in someone's ear. But it's ups and downs, isn't it? And the other side of it is, you know, not everyone wants to go out on a cold February night to some meeting room. It is easier to participate; it's swings and roundabouts, really, I think."**

(Big Local worker)



Denis Malachov

Aside from technological difficulties, such as internet connections failing, speakers breaking and dying batteries, the partnerships also highlighted that it's challenging to participate and have a say on Zoom. As many of us experienced in lockdown, working from home brought about an array of interruptions from other family members, children, dogs, cats and parrots (in the case of one participant!). It has also enabled insights into people's homes and lives that were previously hidden from view, loosening previous boundaries between private domestic space and the more public space of community. We noted that it was commonplace for partnership members to avoid 'virtual backgrounds', but many Big Local reps chose to use them, sometimes showing images from their areas. One area had a lively discussion about how virtual backgrounds can feel uncomfortable, as though people are hiding something. In many meetings, we also observed that some partnership members turned their cameras off or said they could not have cameras on for technological reasons.

Furthermore, the use of the mute function changes the group dynamic. One Big Local resident member said that people are "less present" on Zoom. "...People are a little bit Zoomed out, and you can kind of like, you can see them on their phones, or they're just muting and talking to their partners in the background or whatever". Another said the lack of "chitter-chatter" before and after a meeting that enables people to "talk about their shopping disaster today, or, you know, the wife who fell over, or the grandma who's died, or whatever else", is a crucial part of social interaction that partnerships are not getting elsewhere. However, one of the partnerships' core groups successfully managed to have a social working day through Zoom, so they could ask questions and share banter while working, almost as though they were sitting in the same office. It helped them to get closer to each other as a team.

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**“ I thought I’d been a part of a team before, but it wasn’t like this. This is a really harmonious team, and that’s one of the biggest positives from this lockdown situation is that while it forced us away from going to the office, or to our community space, to the hub, it put us all in the same box virtually and in that sense we got to know each other professionally so well that we really know each other’s skills. And we really know how and where to rely on each other. And yeah, I’m grateful for that experience really.”**

(Big Local worker)

## **Legitimacy and decisions on social media, messaging and emails**

In all partnership areas we spoke to, communication outside partnership meetings occurred using different mediums, with emails being the common denominator as all partnerships used them. However, how different groups used email and the legitimacy afforded this medium varied. For example, some groups felt big decisions had to be verified by emails after a meeting, while others used meetings to verify information shared in a previous email. Likewise, they often considered the different forums for talking to partnership members in groups, such as WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger, as less legitimate. Therefore, decisions made in these formats almost appeared to ‘not count’. Anthropologist Daniel Miller (2013) discusses how historically, people consider Facebook a less legitimate form of communication and relationship building, but one that fosters kinship and relatedness. Although most groups considered all decisions occurring in partnership meetings, as we discussed

earlier in ‘types of decision making’, emails were also a space for proper communication. Several partnerships also mentioned the use of Doodle polls or similar software programmes to take smaller decisions as a partnership.

Emails were used in a versatile way by all partnership groups, for example:

- to send out agendas and minutes before and after meetings
- to have a preliminary discussion about a decision clarified later on Zoom (saving time for discussion)
- to explain something said in Zoom and make it official by using email
- used between meetings for various communication
- used for small decisions, such as agreeing on meeting dates, an extra day per week for a worker or a minor spend on a new door for the hub
- used for urgent matters. Whether people respond promptly is hit and miss in most areas.

In example one above about active technology users, group members described a sense that Zoom meetings are not “legitimate enough”, and therefore “more decisions are kind of cemented by email now”. (Big Local worker). Furthermore, dominating voices in meetings can come across in the same way on emails:

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**“ ...a little bit like in a meeting really, some people would just send a simple email saying, ‘Yes, I’ve put my name to this, I agree,’ and whereas the others would be kind of leading with, you know, a few paragraphs of email and more conversations and question around it. So, kind of dominating voices in the emails as well sort of thing.”**

(Big Local worker)

## Connecting with the community during the pandemic

During the pandemic, digital communication has been key, especially using social media for out-group communication. Additionally, out-group communication happens through text messaging, phone calls and personal networks. Many Big Local partnership members are also members of other community organisations, and they use these to get a feel for what is happening in the local area.

We asked the partnerships how they involve the community in decision making during the COVID-19 pandemic when face-to-face communication was mainly out of the question. All agreed it was extremely challenging, particularly because of digital poverty in most areas. For example, in one area the partnership members described how access to Wi-Fi is scarce and digital devices often shared among extended family members. The partnership has provided dongles for internet connection and other technology to enable parts of the community to get online, but the digital divide is still huge. Involving the wider community in decision-making was commonly referred to as challenging, even in pre-pandemic times. The worker from this partnership described their attempts at connecting with the local community as: "You can take a horse to water, but you can't make it drink. So, you've got to give the people the ability – the opportunity to get information if they want it, but you can't force them."

Some of the research participants said that to engage the community, they would have had to put on an event or promise food or fun activities to lure people into increasing their involvement, which cannot be done online. As we discussed earlier, this was also mentioned as a method for recruiting members to the partnership. Although social media has become more important in involving the local community, many still rely on word of mouth, display boards, posters and phone calls or texts.

## Digital exclusion and online decisions

Digital exclusions happen in several ways, but importantly, all partnerships put a lot of effort into being as inclusive as possible for both their members and the wider community. Nevertheless, exclusions happen due to structural barriers that can be difficult to overcome. We found that some of the main digital exclusions within partnerships related to:

- lack of accessibility to meetings, due to internet connectivity problems or inappropriate or missing devices
- inability to use or dislike and unwillingness to use communication mediums such as WhatsApp, Facebook or Zoom
- lack of digital expertise in the partnership regarding the range of out-group communication mediums, such as Twitter or Instagram

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**W** So [anonymous] in our steering group [is a] member that doesn't have a phone, so I can't phone her, she's not in our WhatsApp group and her emails are hit and miss. So, she's quite an interesting person to engage with. Like I say, she comes from a very different viewpoint most of the time. And she will – so she may not vote in a Zoom call but she'll always follow it up with an email to me and say [...] 'thank you for that and just to say I do agree with it or I'm not sure that's a good idea'. Mostly she'll only email me if she's agreeing."

(Big Local worker)

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**W** Yeah, 'cos a couple of members of the partnership have sort of basically dropped out, because they're not interested in even trying to use technology, which is obviously a shame. But, you know, it's their choice. It's certainly a lot more difficult and it's been mostly through email and Zoom, which is okay. It inevitably excludes some people but difficult to know what else you can do."

(Big Local chair)

As many of partnership members have personal connections and friendships, there are possibilities of exclusion from smaller and more informal decision-making processes. For example, friendship groups may have their own WhatsApp group where they discuss decisions informally before meeting. Some have smaller Zoom meetings before a bigger meeting takes place, as we discussed earlier regarding decision-making processes.

## Summary

Understanding informal power structures and organisational culture is key to understanding how groups work when making small and wide structural decisions (Jones, 2006). We have examined what or who motivates and inspires active involvement, and how this happens informally and online. For example, there are partnerships that use group messaging or social media for communication about decisions and some that communicate mostly by email. Before the pandemic, such decisions were often taken over a cup of tea, which has implications for the atmosphere, culture and functioning of each group. As we live in an increasingly digital world, understanding reasons for digital inclusion in decision making is vital. Digital communication has advantages and disadvantages regarding participation and decision making, and therefore also the operation of power.

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## 9. Conclusions: Practising power differently

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Most Big Local partnership members agree that it's important having power to take decisions – and to act upon such decisions—is important. There is nothing wrong with having the power to plan and complete projects, and to formulate a vision for the future. Indeed, getting things done requires having the power to act. The Big Local ethos is for decision making to be resident-led and community-owned and for local groups to exercise power collectively. If the partnerships do not always do this as well as they might wish, this is no surprise! They function in a broader social context in which struggles about power are common and not equally shared.

Knowledge and experience gained in other areas of life often shape the power distribution in Big Local partnership meetings. Wider social values and expectations can become intertwined with practices generated and reproduced during decision making. For instance, more influential members may rely on knowledge or confidence gained elsewhere. They may use such experience for their local area's benefit, but they can also, perhaps unintentionally, obscure the decision-making process or discourage others from participating.

We have documented how power operates in different ways within decision-making processes – according to the space where decisions take place, whose voice is heard and why, and how rules are made and interpreted. The experiences of the Big Local partnership members indicate scope to improve power distribution in decision making in particular

and inclusiveness of participation in general. Inequalities generate obstacles to more active participation in decision making. Gender, race, ethnicity and class are often hidden barriers that stop members from sharing and contributing and can combine or intersect to make this all the more difficult.

Our research project findings lead to a call for reflection: to acknowledge power differences, then share that awareness with others, in the process of meetings, or during decision making. If power is not a static thing, it follows that you can transform the power configuration of any meeting (or decision-making process). Practising power differently is both a goal and a process. It offers an opportunity to enhance forms and practices of participation and inclusivity in decision making – and to celebrate the resident-led model that Big Local has so brilliantly developed.

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# 10. Recommendations: Challenging barriers, enabling participation

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The research team was hugely impressed by the Big Local areas' range of activity and achievements. Current accomplishments are due to collaborative work, which is often inspired by individuals who take the initiative and provide leadership or by small groups that develop shared ideas. There is scope to include more local people in decision-making processes, and encourage them to participate more actively.

There is scope to include more local people in decision-making processes, and encourage them to participate more actively. Our observations show that many Big Local members would like to see the decision-making process become more horizontal and intersectional. These general observations invite us to make some particular recommendations:

### Understanding power

It is essential to see power in decision making in fluid and transformative terms. No single configuration of power remains static and unchanging. There are always new decisions to be made, which provides opportunity for continuous refinement of decision-making processes.

### Cooperation

Inspiring individuals who provide leadership can easily incorporate more people's ideas into these visions, and inspirational ideas can attract more people. Soliciting ideas from members is crucial in this respect, but our findings show that some members hesitate to voice their views. Those who lead or facilitate discussions must be aware of the following issues:

- Agendas shape the decision-making process in particular directions, which may not always fully representative of members' views and interests; yet unsatisfied members are unlikely (or unable) to question the priorities set in the agenda
- The social background and life experiences of members can enable or inhibit their participation in meetings, and their influence in the decision-making process, meaning that privilege can easily be reproduced.

### Self-reflection

The barriers outlined above can be put into perspective by self-reflection. We see this as the responsibility of more confident members, who are already leading in shaping decisions. The latter can enhance their appreciation of the barriers experienced by others by tackling them in open discussion or even sharing how they have struggled themselves facing similar issues earlier in their lives perhaps. Sharing such testimony can be very powerful. A self-reflexive approach can inspire leaders to lead in more horizontally and inclusively, and help more reserved members appreciate that they are not alone in experiencing particular difficulties.

### Awareness of intersectionality

The benefits of self-reflection are transferable to efforts to tackle deeper structural obstacles to participation, such as those related to ethnicity, race, age, disability, gender and class. It is so important to take time to acknowledge identity characteristics and reflect upon how these impact decision-making in open conversation. Members from minority positions often wait to hear this acknowledgement, which, in turn, invites and empowers them to share and participate.

### Minimising formality

The formal structure of regular meetings can discourage some members from speaking. The formal structure of meetings might be relaxed by providing conversational opportunities, such as breaking the meeting into smaller groups, which later feedback ideas or perspectives to the larger group. It is easier for some members to share their views in small-group conversation. Similarly, introducing opportunities for humour and informal conversation can encourage less confident members to participate more actively. According to our findings, discussion without agendas and informal meetings would also be welcome.

### Taking small steps

The following suggestions emerged directly from interviewees themselves or are already in place in some areas.

- Allow all members to chair meetings.
- Encourage members to reflect on – and revise – their structures, rules and regulations, including what people know about the rules and how they can change them.
- Make the most of agendas – encourage and practise coming up with agenda items.
- Prepare meeting documents in accessible language with short summaries.
- Add induction for new members (already in place in some areas).
- Start buddying schemes where an experienced member shadows a newer member and shows them the ropes to combat feeling lost or the unfamiliar culture of meetings.
- Incentivise young people by creating a ‘special legacy’ scheme.
- Recruit members from the Youth Offending Service
- Include photos of a diversity of people on posters, including those from a range of different ethnic groups and LGBT couples and families.
- Pay for childcare, so that parents can participate in meetings.
- Find other mediums than text-based notes (such as minutes), which can be challenging for those with learning difficulties to process, for example, audio recordings of meetings or drop-ins with chairs for follow-up questions.
- Provide leaflets published in different languages.
- Create opportunities to engage with Big Local outside formal meetings through other activities such as family fun days.
- Keep events open to the wider public, and not just estate-based.

- Be sensitive about the spaces where meetings are held (for instance, a pub might be inappropriate for Muslims or people with disabilities participating through Zoom).
- Consider having informal gatherings online, such as coffee Wednesdays, where people can meet without agendas.
- Keep expectations of partnership members realistic, don't keep them too long and have (good) food(!)



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# Appendix A: Power, participation and intersectionality

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Power seems like an invisible force, which is, nevertheless, 'felt and lived' to use an expression from a British social theorist, Raymond Williams (1977). It is important not to conceive power as a static, singular 'thing' but rather an ever-changing element of social life. The people with access to it change, so the distribution of power shifts, generating different configurations, including or excluding different people along the way. Power is, therefore, a process, as Stuart Hall, a British-Jamaican scholar of cultural studies, has explained, not a configuration of particular people (2017).

It is this pervasive and intangible quality of power that social theorists call 'hegemony'. This concept can help us appreciate that those who hold power find a way to maintain it, neutralising or circumventing voices that oppose it. They usually do so in indirect ways by repositioning their arguments to counter – or mute – diverging positions, but in a fluid way that's difficult to detect. In other words, power reproduces itself incrementally and deftly in the flow of social life and often covers its tracks.

We use this framing of power workings to begin to explore Big Local partnership meetings and other Big Local decision-making processes. To help us identify specific practices of power – that is, what people do with power and what power does – we draw on Stephen Lukes' (1974) formulation of the three different 'faces' of power. The first face refers to the behaviour and authority of people who exert power over others explicitly. By their role or

experience, they can assume and impose a 'hegemonic' way of doing things, which can be difficult to challenge. This leads us to the second face of power, which is concerned with setting the agenda – a practice of power applying to Big Local partnerships. It helps us consider the context and constraints within which issues are decided. Agenda-setting is important regarding individual meetings, both in terms of the content and form of the discussion. It is perhaps even more important in articulating priorities more widely, for example, in Big Local plans. In both meetings and planning, power becomes embedded in structures. All of this has implications for participation in community meetings and the direction of meeting decisions. However, to deepen our exploration of decision-making processes, we need to bring an additional element into the picture – the relationship between power and knowledge.

An insight from social theory is that power is inseparable from knowledge, as theorised by the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1980). Those who hold more power than others succeed in reproducing it – in a way that looks effortless and natural – because they have knowledge that others may not possess. In the context of decision-making, such as in community meetings, relevant knowledge includes information about the wider world, experiences of bureaucratic procedures, legal or financial expertise, or simply command of a technical or expert language (such as the language conventionally used in board meetings). Thereby, knowledge reproduces power, intentionally or unintentionally. At the same time, power provides access to knowledge, and through practice, confidence to exercise power knowledgeably.

Having command of a situation and feeling at ease about the exercise of power leads us to draw on other social theory. Pierre Bourdieu (also a French philosopher and sociologist) developed a concept called 'habitus', which refers to taken-for-granted and deeply engrained ways of thinking, doing and being in the world (Bourdieu, 1977). Someone who has long been familiar with how meetings operate through their work as a civil servant, for instance, arrives in a community meeting with a 'feel for the game'. This bestows what Bourdieu calls 'symbolic power' on the people who appear to know how to conduct themselves and operate effectively in such situations. Yet, the operation of this kind of power is largely hidden from view. This connects us back to Lukes' 'third face of power' – power that resides in the values and assumptions that underpin what is considered to be the right way to act.

As we said earlier, power is not a thing but a process. Bourdieu points out how symbolic power is 'relational'. In other words, for a person to have symbolic power, their way of doing things needs to be valued. This means that whether (or not) a person's habitus is valued depends on the context (or 'field' in Bourdieu's terms) in which they find themselves. If a meeting is structured in a rather formal bureaucratic way, those familiar with this language and style, who have knowledge of procedure and can speak fluidly and confidently, are likely to be perceived by others as competent and a good fit for leadership roles. Conversely, behaviour that is not in line with the dominant style might be perceived as inappropriate and their contributions undervalued, even silenced. Excluded individuals experience 'symbolic violence' arising from the power differentials and hierarchy between the different social groups.

That said, having power is not in itself a problem. In the context of Big Local, all areas benefit from members who provide leadership **for** others and take the initiative, perhaps drawing inspiration from their previous knowledge. Power can stimulate activity and lead to achievement. Dissatisfaction with a particular power configuration emerges when power is used and maintained in ways that make others feel excluded and disregarded. However, power does not have to be dominating. Jenny Pearce (2013) distinguishes between power **over** and power **with**. For Pearce, non-dominating power builds capacities with others. This thinking is different from what we often call 'empowerment'. For Pearce, empowerment allows power to be shared but "does not transform" power itself. Instead, Pearce argues that 'horizontal' power

relations might foster a better culture of inclusion and one that limits the power of individuals or small groups. Power **with** is jointly developed power, which she calls 'coactive' rather than coercive. This form of power "nurtures cooperation and capacity to act but also impacts and generates change" (Pearce, 2013, pp. 641-46).

Citizen and activist groups globally have explored different approaches to decentralising power, which are relevant for thinking about the work of Big Local. One example is the global Occupy movement, which first emerged in 2011 was a social movement sparked by feelings of alienation or distance from political power. Its members shared discontent with conventional forms of political participation, such as voting for parties and attempted to transform hierarchical expressions of power within groups. Occupy activists engaged in conscious reflection around what they call 'horizontal' decision making – an instance of power **with**. It resulted in new decision-making experiments, notably general assemblies that consist of regular meetings which everybody attends (usually in person). Facilitators are elected on each occasion to enhance dialogue and ensure that all voices can emerge freely and everyone can hear them. They seek to ensure that people do not talk when someone else is speaking and only speak when making a relevant contribution. They assess each agenda point during the meeting with 'temperature checks' in which participants make hand signals to demonstrate agreement or ask for clarification. They use physical gestures and talk to enhance the visibility of participation.

Previous research (Big Local, 2020) suggests intersectional protected characteristics may increase the likelihood of voices being silenced, such as the prevalence of white male decision-makers in Big Local partnerships or underrepresentation of younger age groups or those from BAME backgrounds. Throughout our analysis, we have used 'intersectionality' as a lens to consider power relations and the implications of the different characteristics of our research participants. The concept of intersectionality was introduced to examine the intersection of race, class and gender (for example, Crenshaw 1991). It refers to how an array of socially constructed dimensions of difference intersect to shape each person's experiences and actions (Misra et al., 2020).

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# Appendix B: Methodology

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## Research design and objectives

Our overall aims and objectives were to undertake ethnographic research into community decisions and to explore how power operates within decision-making. This included a focus on how which participants use their voice, for example, through connections or their history and time in an area, as well as through intersectionality, that is, the relationship between different characteristics such as gender, age and ethnicity.

We also wanted to pay attention to how and what had changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the use of virtual space and online communication and the obstacles to participation for partnership and community members during this time. Finally, as well as our original objectives, we uncovered a further strand of interest through our process of virtual ethnographic research, namely, the process and style of decision making and how bureaucratic procedures affect outcomes.

### **Our research questions are as follows:**

How does power operate in partnerships' decision making?

- What are the practices of speaking and listening that underpin the structure and culture of meetings? How is disagreement handled or silenced?
- Who commands authority in meetings in visible ways? How is 'social capital' mobilised in discussion and decision making in meetings (for example, relating to gender)?

- Who or what inspires participation? How can partnerships involve local community residents in decision making?
- In what ways has the use of online technology disrupted or asserted decision-making processes? Does online technology offer the potential for new ways of working for more democratic decision making? And how does it hinder inclusion?

A team of social anthropologists and sociologists with extensive experience in ethnographic research carried out this research project. All team members were involved in the original empirical research this project entailed, including live - and lively - informal discussion with Big Local partnerships in five areas and formal observations of various their meetings. Carin Tunåker undertook all the formal interviews with partnership members, LBig Local reps and workers. Analysis and writing were shared and collaborative activities, but research assistant Keira Pratt-Boyden completed the detailed work of thematic coding that made this possible. Dawn Lyon led the project team.

## Recruitment and selection of areas and Interviewees

We based the initial selection of areas on advice from Local Trust, which gave us a list of 10 areas from which we chose five that were geographically dispersed and demographically varied. We considered the area's diversity of ethnic backgrounds, type partnership leadership, metropolitan/urban/rural, and population size.

Our aim in recruitment was to speak with a spread of participants across age, ethnicity, gender and role within the partnerships. These all varied depending on each partnership's composition. The table below shows the general composition of demographics for each area based on publicly available information. There was significant breadth and diversity in the five areas studied.

**Table B.1: Population and demographics**

	Population	Demographic information
Area A	20,000	50% White British, 50% BAME. Approx. 50% Christian, 15% Muslim, 15% Hindu.
Area B	8,000	90% White British/White other. Small BAME population. Approx. 55% Christian, 40% no religion, very small representation of other faiths.
Area C	8,000	Demographics different in the two parts of the area. Locality 1: 70% BAME and 8% White. 85% Muslim. Around 20% speak English as their first language. Locality 2: 40% BAME and 40% White. 40% Muslim, 30% Christian. 65% speak English as their first language.
Area D	15,000	92% White British, 95% English as main spoken language. 55% Christian, 30% no religion. 3% Muslim.
Area E	4,000	53% White, approx. 47% BAME. Approximately 60% are Christian or no religion, and around 40% Muslim.

Overall, we interviewed 12 women and 14 men, of which nine were from BAME backgrounds and 17 were from White backgrounds. To ensure anonymity, we have not given a further breakdown of ethnicities or other demographic information for each area. Participants'

ages ranged between approximately 30 to 75, with more representation from the age groups from 50+. In addition, we interviewed 16 resident members (or co-opted members), six workers and four Big Local reps.

**Table B.2: Age, gender and ethnicity of participants**

	BAME	White British/ Other	Under 30	30-39	40-49	50-59	60+	Totals
Female	4	8	0	3	1	6	2	12
Male	4	10	0	1	5	2	6	14
All	8	18	0	4	6	8	8	26

We approached Big Local representatives for each area for a pre-meeting to discuss the best approach to recruit research participants. In some areas, we also had pre-meetings with several partnership members. In three areas, we attended virtual partnership meetings before approaching individual members for interviews, which enabled e-meeting and introductions before the more intimate one-to-one interviews. In the two areas where for logistical reasons, we could not start fieldwork with participant observation in meetings, recruitment for individual one-to-one interviews was more challenging, and interviews slightly less relaxed and shorter in length. In one of these areas, the rep offered to send a photograph of the researcher holding a cup of tea on Zoom to the partnership members. It helped them to contextualise and familiarise, which encouraged some participants to come forward.

Aside from signing up to talking to a stranger online, our research participants also went over and above to participate in this project in various ways. As the project took place amid the global COVID-19 pandemic, many of our participants had their challenges and difficulties to navigate, with loss and illness, isolation, home-schooling and changed work situations. However, we are extremely grateful for the perseverance, resilience and generous attitudes of all our research participants.

### **Analysis and ethical considerations**

Our data consisted of verbatim interview transcripts, observation notes from meetings, informal meeting notes and partnership document. We uploaded most of these documents to NVivo (excluding Terms of Reference and meeting minutes), a software program that facilitates thematic qualitative data analysis. The team undertook independent coding exercises of sample interviews to identify key themes. We used our research questions and aims as a guide (deductive approach): power, intersectionality, decision making, space and voice. Alongside this, we read selected interviews for additional themes that we had not fully anticipated (inductive approach), such as bureaucracy and the non-recognition of decision making. The team agreed on a coding framework and Keira (Research Assistant coded all transcripts and observations, refining the framework in regular discussion with the wider team.

Aside from the formal ethical approval from the University of Kent, and collection of prior informed consent from all participants and the provision of participant information sheets, we faced several ethical conundrums throughout the research. Ensuring anonymity and confidentiality of sensitive data was an ongoing consideration, particularly given

the relatively small sample of participants. Additionally, we recognise that our very presence in meetings and observations may have affected the atmosphere, tone and process. We also recognise that those who come forth to be interviewed might be the more vocal and confident members of partnerships. We have not had the opportunity to discuss those members who have recently or historically left the groups.

Furthermore, we are applying a critical lens to practices that perhaps partnerships take for granted and that have not questioned or considered before. Subsequently, our findings may come across as criticisms. We aim to encourage reflection rather than to criticise. Throughout the research, we have been humbled by the fantastic, dedicated and life-changing work that all the partnerships carry out. Individuals go above and beyond to make their communities better and to support one another. Each partnership takes much care and attention to ensure that they promote diversity and inclusion and that everyone has a say in decisions. We have found that this is done differently across the board and that there are opportunities to (re)-consider practices and try other ways of allowing voices to be heard.

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Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of local communities, to enable them to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live. We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding through our work supporting local communities make their areas better places to live, and to draw on the learning from our work to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

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