

Evaluation of Invest Local: weathering the storms 2016- 2023 – summary

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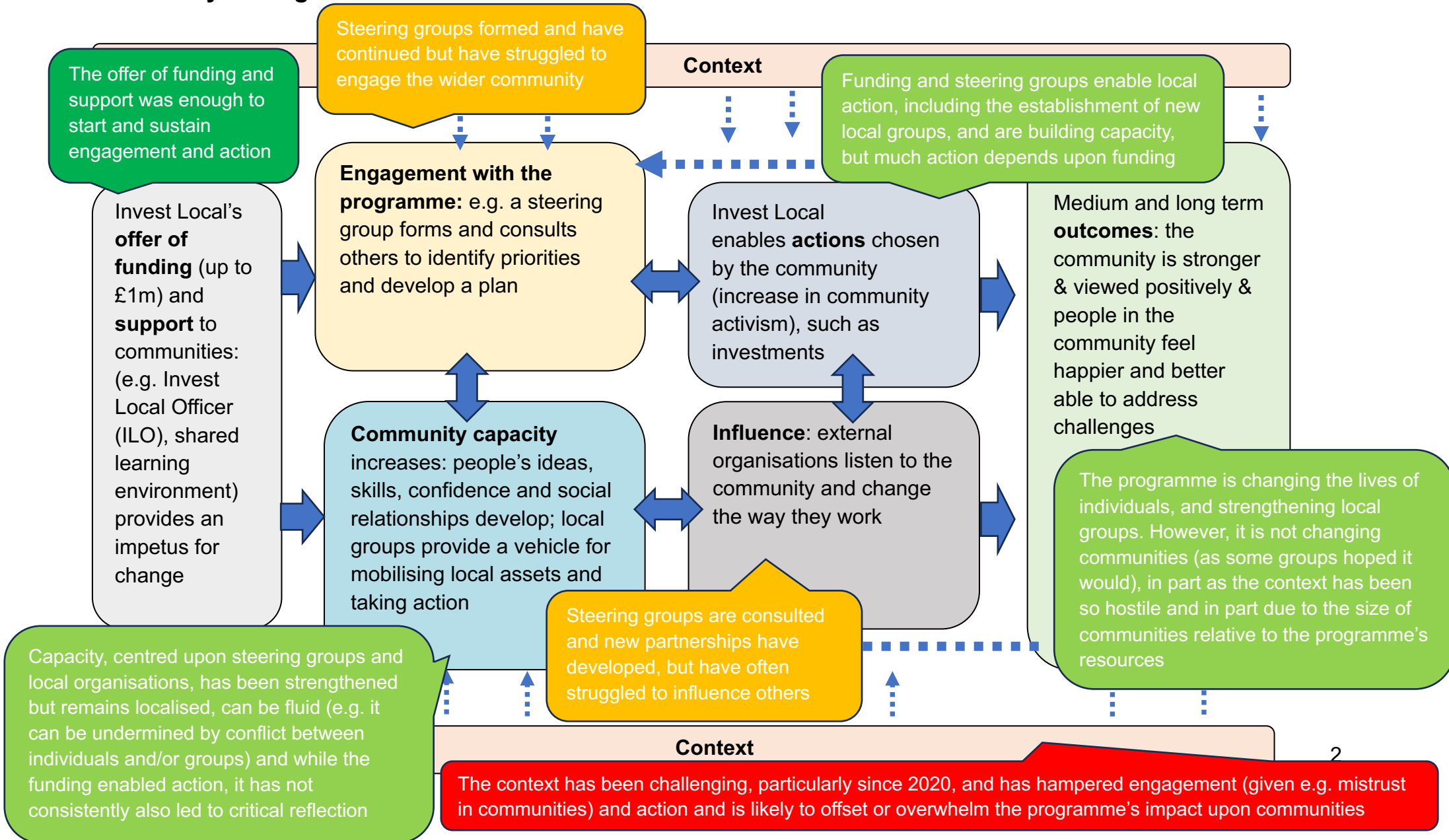
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Figure 1: outlines the programme's theory of change and assesses how well it is working at this stage.

Key findings



Introduction

- 1.1. Invest Local is a ten-year programme of funding and support for 13 communities¹ across Wales. It is funded by a £16.5m endowment from (what was) the Big Lottery Fund² and is managed by the Building Communities Trust (BCT).

The programme offer and aims

- 1.2. As figure 1 illustrates, the programme aims to increase the consciousness (a combination of critical reflection and action)³, confidence, capacity and influence of communities and, over the long term, increase the well-being and resilience (the ability to cope with adversity) of individuals who live in those communities. To help achieve this, the programme offers each community up to £1m to invest, plus support from an Invest Local Officer (ILO) and access to a programme of shared learning, over a period of 10 years. It is up to each community to identify their priorities, who they will work with and how their money will be used. In return for the offer of long term and flexible funding and support, the programme requires the formation of a local steering group to lead the programme and take decisions and actions (including deciding on investments) and engage extensively with the wider community.

The evaluation of the programme

- 1.3. As figure 1 illustrates, the evaluation has taken a theory-based approach, drawing upon data triangulated from multiple sources including:
 - in depth interviews with 48 stakeholders, including members of steering groups, communities and ILOs;
 - site visits and discussions with residents;

¹ Aberfan, Merthyr Vale and Mount Pleasant (Ynysowen); Caerau; Cefn Golau; Clase; Colwyn Bay (Glyn); Hubberston and Hakin; Llwynhendy; Maesgeirchen; Penywaun; Phillipstown; Pillgwenlly (Pill); Plas Madoc; Trowbridge and St Mellons.

² This is now the National Lottery Community Fund.

³ Consciousness is a process through which critical thinking and reflection leads to greater understanding of people's situations, including their strengths and their challenges, informing and enabling action to build upon their strengths and address the challenges and constraints they face.

- a desk-based review of documents, such as steering groups' Driving Change plans; and
- analysis of secondary data, such as survey data (e.g. from the Census) and administrative data (e.g. data collected by the Department for Work and Pensions).

The context for the programme

- 1.4. As figure 2 illustrates, the period 2016-2023 has been a very challenging one. The changes and crises have created an extended period of insecurity and instability for many people, described as a “permacrisis”⁴. The impacts of this have been particularly keenly felt in Invest Local communities which were purposely chosen because they could be characterised as communities that had been “left behind”. They have suffered from a high level of socioeconomic deprivation, have been disproportionately impacted by economic decline and/or welfare reforms; and have not benefited from additional funding, such as National Lottery funding, in the past.
- 1.5. The pressures created by a series of crises have inevitably led some people to turn inward, and focus upon their own lives and livelihoods, rather than those of their communities. Although the pandemic, in particular, was a spur for some people and renewed community action, it left many exhausted and it has been difficult to sustain the level of activity it generated. The crises, coupled with the legacy of mistrust left by earlier community development initiatives that were felt to have failed in some communities⁵, shaped each communities' response to the programme.

⁴ “Permacrisis” was the Collins English Dictionary “word of the year” in 2022.

⁵ The most obvious example was Plas Madoc, where several staff of the Communities First project were jailed for fraud. However, there are also communities where earlier initiatives, such as Communities First, were felt to have left a positive legacy.

Figure 2: changes in the programme's context 2016-2023

	2016-2020: Sluggish recovery following the great recession	2020-2021: The COVID-19 pandemic	2021-2023: The cost of living crisis
Employment	Increasing	Stagnant	Increasing
Incomes and poverty	Wages slowly recovering; welfare benefits for the working age population cut	Employment income fell, but welfare benefits were temporarily increased; relative poverty declined somewhat	Real cuts in income as wages and benefits fall behind inflation
Health and wellbeing	Improving	Sharp declines in mental health and well-being for most; impact upon the physical health of some ⁶	Poor mental health and well-being continues, although people's overall health appears to be improving
Education	Improving	Widespread disruption to children and young people's education	Some children and young people struggle to recover from the disruption
Public investment	Austerity means sharp cuts	Additional spending upon education	Inflation means real terms cuts in public investment

Sources: [PHW, 2023](#) ; [Statswales, 2023](#); [Estyn 2023, 2022](#); [ONS, 2020b](#); [WCPP, 2022](#); [The Resolution Foundation, 2020](#); [Senedd, 2020](#); [WCPP, 2019](#); [ONS, 2018](#).

⁶ For example, those with poorer health were at greater risk and mortality rates were higher in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas.

Communities' response to Invest Local's offer

- 1.6. The programme's offer of up to £1m was large enough to get people's interest and a steering group formed in each community. It has also proven large enough, to continue to motivate enough people's engagement. This has helped sustain groups despite the difficulties they experienced, and the demands the programme places upon people.

- 1.7. However, the offer of up to £1m was not, and has not yet proven large enough to encourage widespread engagement with the programme across each community. In larger communities, awareness of the programme is generally patchy at best. Interest in the programme, particularly in smaller more close-knit communities, could often be expressed as criticism, cynicism or scepticism, rather than constructive engagement and support (although there are a couple of exceptions to this, where more positive interest is building). This could be very frustrating or distressing for steering group members who had often devoted substantial amounts of time and energy to the programme on a voluntary basis. This, coupled with their small size and, in some cases, conflict within the group, means steering groups are often fragile.

- 1.8. Figure 3 uses the COM-B model ([Michie et al., 2011](#)), to highlight how people's capabilities, motivations and access to opportunities shaped their behaviour, in this case, their engagement with the programme, such as volunteering to get involved in the steering group or to help organise local events.

Figure 3: examples of the different factors shaping people’s involvement in the programme



* The withdrawal of people from steering groups after their organisation received funding may lead to a transactional involvement, and representatives of groups who got involved, secured funding and then dropped out, were criticised.

Communities’ response to the context (and use of the Invest Local offer)

1.9. Invest Local gives communities (and by extension steering groups) freedom over how to use the funding and what action to take⁷. The challenging context, outlined above, coupled with the often limited engagement of the wider community, have shaped the decisions that steering groups made about what to invest in. Generally, the priorities that emerged from community consultation were broad and easy to support but did not give steering groups specific direction on what to do or how to do it. Given a number of factors summarised in figure 4, steering groups have tended to focus upon ensuring there is somewhere for people to go, something to do and someone to talk to⁸, in each community.

Figure 4: key factors shaping steering groups’ decisions to invest in community spaces and community groups

Opportunity	Motivation	Capability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Steering groups received requests/proposals to invest in community places, spaces and groups; and <input type="checkbox"/> these investments were in line with the broad priorities identified by community consultation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Community places, spaces and groups are particularly important in poorer communities, where people tend to be more reliant upon local opportunities; <input type="checkbox"/> at the start of the programme, community places, spaces and groups were often struggling to secure investment; <input type="checkbox"/> investing in community places, spaces and groups sometimes offered the prospect of “quick 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Investing in community spaces and groups is conceptually relatively straightforward⁹, although often difficult in practice, particularly in relation to new buildings; and

⁷ The main constraint is that the funding must not be used for political or illegal purposes.

⁸ This phrase is associated with youth work, and while there are similarities to a youth work approach, there are also important differences. For example, investing in places to go, such as community spaces, was generally to enable others (i.e. local groups and organisations) to use the space, rather than enabling the funding organisation (in this case the Invest Local steering group) to use the building itself, for its own purposes (i.e. delivering youth work).

⁹ In contrast investments to, for example, tackle so called ‘wicked problems’ like poverty, are inherently difficult to address, as there are no simple solutions, as they are complex issues, with multiple possible causes and involve multiple factors and actors.

	<p>wins”, of making change visible; and</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> steering groups’ members often had a vested interest in the investments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> local groups and organisations often took responsibility for delivery (reducing demands upon steering groups)
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1.10. The specific investments made in each community differed and were shaped by the character of communities and the specific assets, opportunities and challenges they presented to steering groups. For example, some steering groups focused upon saving and sustaining existing community spaces and groups, while others (in communities without adequate community buildings), focused upon developing new community spaces.

1.11. In addition, two other broad priorities for action developed:

- community communication and engagement (given the difficulties engaging the wider community); and
- responding to shocks, most notably the pandemic and cost of living crisis, and growing concerns about their impact upon people’s mental health and well-being, particularly in the period from 2020 onwards.

1.12. These two priorities were shaped by the context and also by encouragement and support from BCT, which, for example, released additional funding to help steering groups respond to the impact of the pandemic and later the cost of living crisis. Although total spending upon these two priorities is dwarfed by core investments in for example, local buildings and groups, the core investments support these two additional priorities; for example they can help:

- demonstrate that change is happening as a result of Invest Local, which it is hoped will encourage wider engagement with the programme; and

- ameliorate the impacts of poverty by providing free or inexpensive places to go, things to do and access to necessities, such as food and warmth, in people's communities.

The impact of the programme upon community capacity and influence

- 1.13. Establishing and sustaining a steering group in each community has been an important achievement. The groups provide a platform that supports and enables community action and influence. Steering groups' responses to the pandemic and, more recently, the cost of living crisis, supported by the release of small amounts of additional funding (£10,000), demonstrated the capacity the programme has built and the ways this helps strengthen the resilience of communities. Most communities reached large numbers of people and helped ensure that their basic needs for food and social contact were met and often did so more swiftly and in a more person-centred way than the public sector could. This is discussed in detail in an earlier report¹⁰.
- 1.14. Nevertheless, in late 2023, four of the 13 steering groups were somewhat stuck and were struggling to move forward, although it was expected that the problems could be resolved. Several others were making strong or steady progress, but remain fragile. Moreover, while the funding enables action, it and the other elements of the programme (such as the requirement to engage the wider community, support from ILOs and shared learning) have not necessarily (or consistently) led to critical reflection by all steering groups¹¹.
- 1.15. Running Invest Local is a huge ask for the members of steering groups. When they joined, some members had little experience setting goals and developing delivery plans, chairing and facilitating meetings and/or making decisions that could involve hundreds of thousands of pounds. Their workload and the pressures they face, including criticism from within their community, can sap their energy and can make groups defensive. People may have joined

¹⁰ BCT (2021)

¹¹ The programme aims to increase people's "consciousness", a process through which critical thinking and reflection leads to greater understanding of people's situations, including their strengths and their challenges, informing and enabling action to build upon their strengths and address the challenges and constraints they face.

steering groups to ‘do something’, rather than spend their time trying to persuade others in the community to get involved. They often feel under pressure to show results, and groups have sometimes struggled to stand back and reflect. They can also, for example, sometimes:

- (understandably) find it easier to identify problems than solutions to often “wicked problems” like poverty and social exclusion that stunt people’s well-being and resilience¹² in their community (although it should also be noted that, for example, developing new community buildings or spaces such as parks, is neither quick nor easy);
- rely upon the funding to enable action, and sometimes struggle to identify and/or mobilise all the assets and strengths of their communities; and/or
- find it easier to “blame” the community for not getting involved, rather than reflecting on how their own processes and practices might discourage people from engaging.

1.16. However, through financial investment and also by strengthening links between different local groups and organisations, Invest Local has built capacity beyond the steering group. For example, as one steering group has identified, part of their ethos is supporting “anyone and any group who asks to make their vision happen!” The combination of easy access to local funding and, in some communities, support from paid community development workers who can help new groups, for example, set up bank accounts, develop plans, introduce them to partners and/or establish governance structures, has helped strengthen “social infrastructure”¹³ (and capacity and resilience). As noted above, many of these local groups have played a key role in supporting communities through the pandemic and the cost of living crisis.

¹² A wicked problem is a social or cultural issue or concern that is inherently difficult to solve, making it hard to identify how it can or should be addressed. In contrast, investing in a community building or space is an easy investment to identify although often difficult to deliver in practice.

¹³ “Social’ infrastructure” has been defined as “the crucial organisations, places and spaces that enable communities to create social connections – to form and sustain relationships that help them to thrive.” ([The British Academy, 2023](#))

- 1.17. It was envisaged that the role of steering groups would be to manage or oversee the programme, rather than directly deliver projects and activities in communities. Two models of partnership have developed. The first involves forging a synergistic partnership with a local organisation that is, or is seeking to become, a local anchor organisation¹⁴ that can deliver a range of services and support in the community. In this model, Invest Local provides the funding and its partner, helps bring local links, knowledge and the capacity to deliver services and support. Two of the areas have been able to do this (the presence of a viable partner is an obvious precondition for this option)¹⁵. The second involves forging a similarly valuable and synergistic relationships with a range of community groups (rather than a single anchor organisation), and in one case, also with the local authority. Three of the steering groups have been able to do this (and again, the presence of viable partners is an obvious precondition).
- 1.18. In two communities, the absence of viable potential partners means that steering groups are in the process of trying to establish themselves as nascent anchor organisations and are more focused upon delivery themselves, rather than relying upon partners to deliver. This is both more ambitious and more challenging and has increased the demands upon steering groups. However, it may also increase the impact of the programme, as the baseline level of capacity in these communities tended to be lower.
- 1.19. Whichever model is viable, paid workers have often proved essential in providing steering groups with the capacity needed to engage with the wider community and help deliver services and support and this appears to be a factor that is holding back some groups which do not have paid workers from progressing further.

¹⁴ Anchor organisations are “community-led or controlled”, “multi-purpose organisations” that have strong local links and support a range of local actions in the community, such as support for social and leisure activities, advice services, food projects and local environmental work ([BCT, 2023](#)).

¹⁵ In each of the two examples a representative of the partner was also a member of the steering group and has been part of the programme.

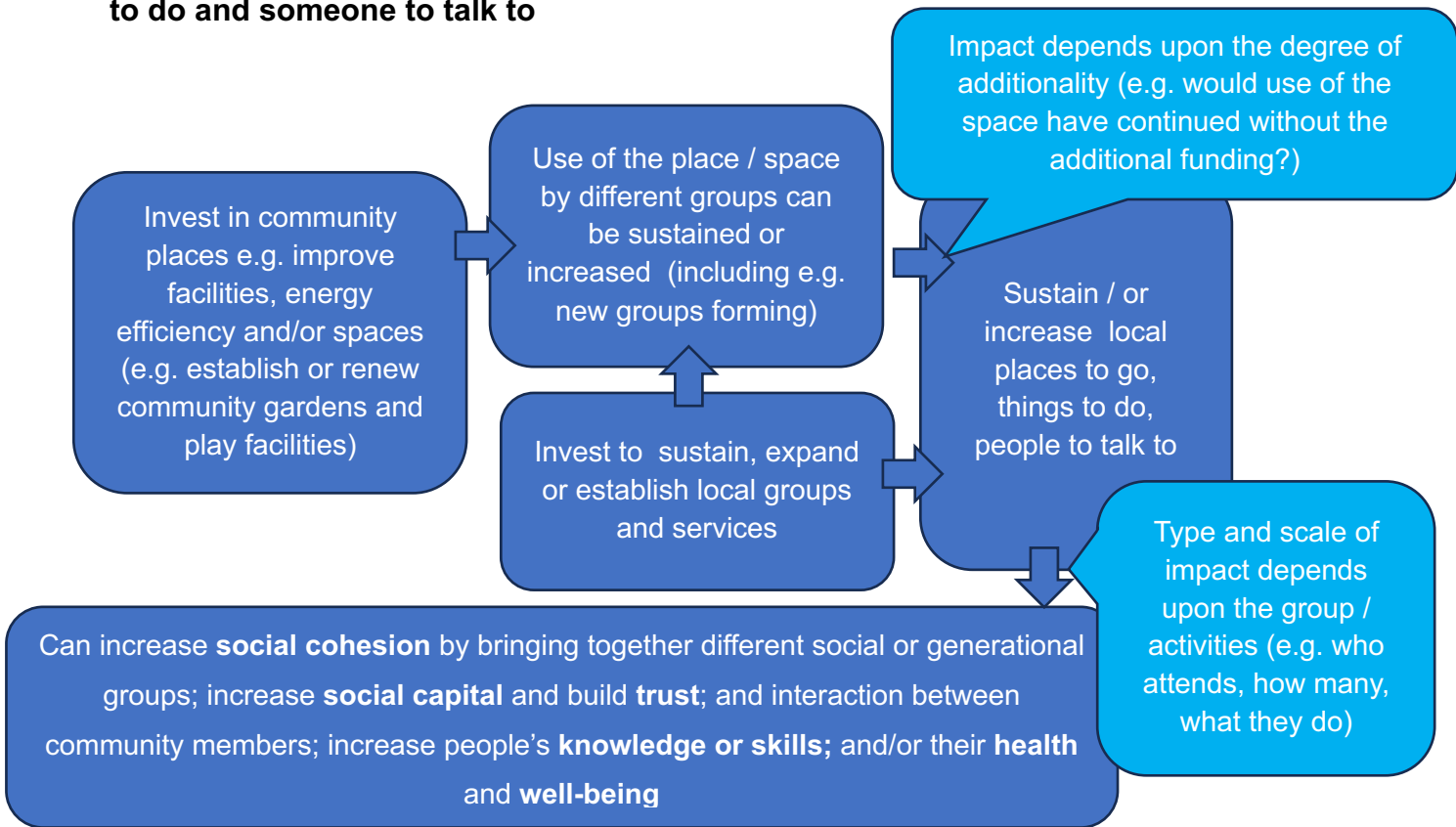
- 1.20. The increases in local capacity and the resources the programme offers provides steering groups with increasing influence within communities. They can, for example, fund and support local places, spaces and groups. There are also a small number of successful partnerships with external organisations such as housing associations or local authorities. External bodies will also often consult steering groups. However, there is generally little confidence amongst interviewees that the communities can influence external organisations.¹⁶ Although it is possible that groups under-estimate the influence they have, examples where groups have struggled to get heard are much more common than examples where they feel they have successfully exerted influence over, for example, the local authority. As one interviewee summed it up, (despite the programme and progress made) the “Council sees areas like this as a problem” and they felt that as a result the area was “neglected” by the LA.

The impact of the programme upon individuals’ well-being and resilience

- 1.21. As figure 5 illustrates, ensuring that there is somewhere for people to go, something to do and someone to talk to in each community is changing individual people’ lives and may over time contribute to changing communities.

¹⁶ In many cases, exerting influence is difficult. Neither simply raising problems nor waiting to be consulted, is likely to be sufficient. The capacity of steering groups, to for example, pro-actively build networks and alliances, petition or lobby officials and politicians and influence the local media, is limited, given the range of other demands upon their time and attention.

Figure 5: examples of the impacts of investing in somewhere to go, something to do and someone to talk to



Cefn Golau Together's MUGA: fun and fitness for children and young people

Together for Trowbridge and St Mellons
Posh Club: strengthening social cohesion through fun and interaction

Philipstown: WarmARTed reducing social isolation through arts and crafts



MaesNi community growing project, improving green spaces, health and well-being



Hubberston and Hakin community centre: saving a valued community hub (and asset)

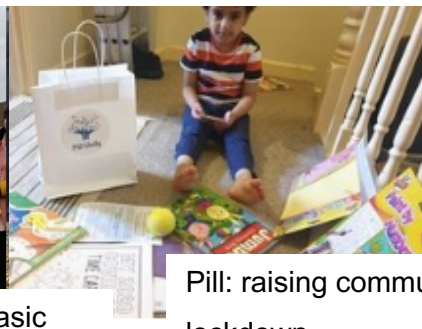


Clase park: a flagship development for the whole community

1.22. Actions to help people cope with shocks like the pandemic and the cost of living crisis have focused upon meeting people’s basic needs, such as access to food (e.g. through food parcels) and heating (e.g. opening warm places), and also people’s social needs (e.g. social groups). These have been a vital part of local responses to growing concerns about people’s poor mental health and well-being in the wake of these shocks.



Food parcels: Meeting basic needs in Plas Madoc



Pill: raising community spirits during lockdown

1.23. As figure 4 illustrates, the degree of impact depends upon the degree of additionality. In many cases Invest Local funds complement other sources of funding and can have a multiplier effect. However, this makes it difficult to isolate the degree of additionality. There are also examples where other funding streams could potentially have been accessed, but where Invest Local funding is seen as more accessible and more flexible (meaning it may be substituted for funding from other sources, such as the National Lottery

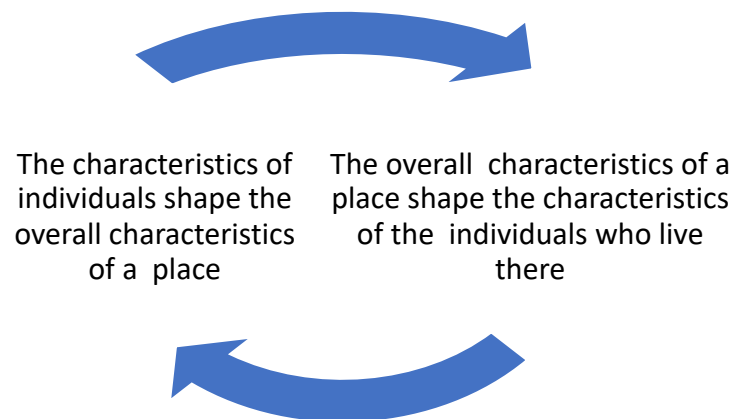
- 1.24. As figure 4 also illustrates, the impacts of the programme also depend on who benefits (e.g. who uses the facilities or attends the group) and what they do; for example:
- investments in play and youth work benefit the health and well-being of children and young people but also their families and, potentially, the wider community if, for example, anti-social behaviour declines;
 - investments in community groups tend to benefit working age and older women who, for example, are more likely to attend social and leisure activities in community buildings, such as community centres and chapels; and
 - some investments are targeted, for example, support for Men's Sheds, which help tackle loneliness and isolation, particularly amongst older men.
- 1.25. These investments have benefited large numbers of people, who could be considered 'disadvantaged', as they lack the assets, such as strong human and social and financial capital; access to green or blue spaces (natural capital); physical capital (such as access to affordable transport and energy, decent housing, and the internet); and/or public capital (such as high quality public services), needed to flourish ([Oxfam, 2009](#)). However, with the partial exception of some of the pandemic and costs of living responses, the programme is often felt by interviewees to have struggled to reach the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people in each of the communities.

The impact of the programme upon people and communities

- 1.26. Over the long term, the programme aims to increase the strength of communities and the well-being and resilience of people. Some steering groups also hope to change their communities. The relationship between individuals and communities is illustrated by figure 6. The impact upon individuals, outlined below, will change the overall well-being and resilience of a community. The more people who benefit, the larger the impact will be. Over

time, this may also change the character of the community and, in doing so, may in turn impact upon the well-being and resilience of other individuals in the community¹⁷. Similarly, actions, such as investments that aim to connect people to their communities, such as support for carnivals, Christmas trees or local histories, can help change the character of the community, and therefore also, individuals' well-being. This is because well-being depends upon both individual attributes and also the attributes of the community people live in ([What Works Wellbeing, 2020](#)); for example, living in areas with higher average incomes, lower levels of unemployment and lower perceptions of anti-social behaviour, is associated with higher levels of individual well-being ([DCLG, 2013](#)).

Figure 6: the relationship between individual and place-based characteristics



1.27. In order to explore this, and also to better understand how changes in the context since 2016, such as austerity, the pandemic and cost of living of crisis, have impacted upon the wellbeing and resilience of people in each community, the evaluation is exploring changes at a community level in areas like education and skills, employment and health. Trends in the indicators in 35 of the small areas (Lower Super Output Areas) that make up the Invest Local communities, have been compared with national or local authority

¹⁷ Although this relationship may not be a linear one as, for example, if the number of individuals who have changed crosses a tipping point, it will trigger a disproportionately sized large change in the character of a community.

trends and also with a matched sample of 70 small areas, that had similar characteristics to the Invest Local areas in 2016.

- 1.28. Given the challenging context the programme has faced since 2016 and the scale of the action in Invest Local areas (e.g. in terms of the numbers of people reached), the evidence suggests that while the programme is changing people's lives, the impact of the programme upon communities' overall levels of well-being and resilience has been blunted or drowned out by the magnitude of the negative external forces of the last few years.

Conclusions

- 1.29. Invest Local has made, and continues to make, a difference to people and communities. The offer of funding (up to £1m), support and shared learning was large enough to:

- encourage a steering group to form and to secure enough community involvement to enable the programme to "get going";
- encourage people and groups to persevere, despite the demands the programme places upon them (in terms of their time, energy and coping with conflict and criticism); and
- support flagship capital investments, such as investments in community buildings or play facilities, and an often impressive range of community groups, services, activities and events.

- 1.30. Therefore, the programme offer has been big enough to make a real difference to people and communities. It has inspired and enabled community led action, strengthened community capacity and is changing the lives, well-being and resilience of individuals. For example, in most communities it is helping:

- small numbers of people to flourish by creating new roles in the community and giving them a new sense purpose, either in steering groups or local groups and organisations supported by Invest Local¹⁸;
- a larger number of people (typically in the low hundreds¹⁹) cope with the twin shocks of the pandemic and the cost of living crisis, by providing access to necessities such as food and warmth; and
- a larger number of people still (typically in mid to high hundreds²⁰) to weather the generally inclement climate (trends) since 2016, by improving their access to community spaces, services, support and/or opportunities locally, that have been directly or indirectly supported by Invest Local²¹.

1.31. Communities' often very impressive responses to the successive shocks of the pandemic and cost of living crisis is perhaps the clearest example to date of the power of the Invest Local model and the ways in which investing in community capacity and infrastructure helps create resilience. The shocks provided an additional impetus for action in many communities. But it was the strengthening of local capacity (through the development of local decision-making groups and networks of local organisations) that meant that even relatively small amounts of funding, such as £10,000 emergency relief funding for the pandemic and the cost of living crisis, could make a real difference to communities' resilience²². The combination of capacity and flexible funds enabled communities to more swiftly and effectively mobilise the assets they had (such as social, human and physical capital, like networks, volunteers and community buildings) in response to the successive crises they have faced.

¹⁸ The impact here differs from community to community,. For example, in some areas with thriving steering groups, many members were already very active in the community, whereas in others, far fewer were. Similarly, the backgrounds of those involved in leading and volunteering for community groups varies.

¹⁹ If calculated on the basis of the number of food parcels distributed and the numbers of people accessing warm spaces.

²⁰ If calculated on the basis of the numbers of people accessing community spaces and groups either directly or indirectly supported by Invest Local. Larger numbers still would, for example, attend community events or benefit from improvements in community spaces (e.g. such as community murals or litter picks).

²¹ Direct support would include investments in a local group or organisation and indirect support, would include investments in the building or community spaces the group or organisation uses.

²² Although it should be noted that the differences in capacity in each community meant that the effectiveness of their responses also differed.

- 1.32. Nevertheless, the funding for Invest Local is dwarfed by the budgets of some community development programmes elsewhere, such as the New Deal for Communities (NDC) in England (each NDC area had about £50m to invest over ten years). The Invest Local funding alone, which equates to between £60-700 per resident over the programme's lifetime²³, was never likely to be large enough to transform communities.²⁴
- 1.33. Invest Local is much more than the offer of £1m though and the programme's theory of change anticipated that, as well as directly enabling action, the funding would also be the catalyst for an increase in the consciousness (a combination of critical reflection and action), confidence, capacity and influence of communities, which would create an impact that went beyond the direct financial investments. This has happened, but yet not at a large scale; for example, the programme:
- has motivated small numbers of volunteers to form steering groups and enabled and inspired others to take action (beyond the steering group). However, the demands upon steering group members are considerable and sometimes excessive (creating the risk of burn out) and the small size of groups mean they remain fragile;
 - has strengthened local groups and community capacity, but has also sometimes struggled to sustain relationships with local groups and has occasionally been riven by conflict between different groups; purposefully targeted communities that could be characterised as "left behind", where earlier community development initiatives had failed, sometimes in infamous ways (most notably, Plas Madoc). The first phase of the programme (2016-2020) therefore, was one of a slow and uneven recovery after the great recession and the second and third phases (2020-21 and 2022-23) have been defined by the pandemic and cost of living crisis. Given this challenging context, the programme has struggled to turn the tide

²³ The size of communities ranges from around 1,500 to 16,000 residents.

²⁴ Given the hostile context the programme has experienced, Invest Local funding has also been dwarfed by the impact of over a decade of austerity upon communities, with sharp cuts in welfare benefits and public services since 2010, and more recently the impact of inflation upon both individuals and groups' financial capital.

of exhaustion, mistrust, pessimism or despair that has led some to turn inwards and focus upon their own lives and livelihoods, and encourage them to look outwards and create a groundswell of self-belief and community activism²⁵; and

- the scale of investments (in terms of the numbers of people who directly benefited) and the challenging context the programme has faced means that, with the possible exception of the pandemic response in some communities²⁶, it has not yet made a difference to overall levels of community well-being and resilience.

1.34. As such, Invest Local both demonstrates the power and potential of trusting communities but also that communities do not have the magic solutions to “wicked problems” like poverty, that have eluded other community development programmes.

1.35. The judgment of the programme’s success depends in large part upon how expectations for the programme are calibrated. BCT’s expectations for the programme were scaled back from the original vision²⁷, to reflect the resources at their disposal and the scale of the challenge they faced. It is achieving its goals of making communities “stronger” and helping individuals “feel” and “cope better”, despite a very challenging context. It is reported, though, to have made somewhat less progress in ensuring that “external organisations and individuals have positive attitudes to and engagement with the community”²⁸. Nevertheless, it is also important to acknowledge that some steering groups have articulated more ambitious goals focused upon changing their communities (and not just individual lives). The evidence here suggests

²⁵ For example, as one interviewee put it “families struggling with damp houses and struggling to put food on their table, are struggling to take on new roles [helping change their community]”.

²⁶ During the pandemic, the numbers of people reached and the importance of the support in helping meet people’s basic needs for food and social contact may have been large enough to have shifted the overall level of well-being of the community. However, it is not possible to directly measure this, given the limitations of the available data.

²⁷ For example, the Trust deed between the Big Lottery Fund and BCT identifies that the “longer term outcomes” are: “the impact of poverty on individuals and the communities in which they live has been reduced and they are more resilient to the impact of poverty and social exclusion” and “local leadership to drive forward the engagement of target communities in local regeneration and resilience has been established and mainstreamed” (p. 20).

²⁸ Taken from Invest Local’s original theory of change

that the scale of the challenges, relative to the resources at their disposal, are limiting the impact they can have.

Reflections on the Invest Local model

- 1.36. Given the challenges communities have faced, the long term flexible funding enabled by the endowment from the National Lottery has been essential. As this report outlines, the last seven years have been a lengthy and often difficult journey for steering groups as, for example, they have fought to overcome mistrust, apathy or even hostility in parts of their communities²⁹; conflict within the group; and the difficulties and delays that can bedevil large investment projects. Both steering groups and other local community groups needed the time and flexibility the programme offered to help them navigate the challenges the last seven years have posed. Nevertheless, despite this long term commitment for the programme, steering groups have often felt under pressure to act swiftly, to save a valued local asset at threat of closure or loss and/or to demonstrate to communities that positive change was possible.
- 1.37. Moreover, the demands the programme places upon the small number of local residents who make up most steering groups are considerable and at times (most notably the pandemic), excessive. While support from ILOs has been valued, the time they can spend supporting each community is constrained. This meant that employing local staff has often been essential to enable steering groups to try to more effectively engage the wider community and partners and also manage and deliver the programme. Similarly, the scope to forge a synergistic partnership with either a local organisation that is, or is seeking to become, a local anchor organisation, or a network of local groups, which can deliver a range of services and support in the community, has underpinned many of the most successful groups.

²⁹ For example, in one community, an interviewee observed that in a community that feels “stuff has been taken away from it” (with for example, the loss of community buildings and spaces and play equipment that was judged unsafe removed by the LA, but not replaced, leaving a play area “desolate”), it was observed that the offer of money could “bring out the worst in people” and invite suspicion about “who’s controlling the money?” and who it was for and who would benefit?

- 1.38. Where neither of these options is viable, a small number of steering groups are in the process of trying to establish themselves as nascent anchor organisations and are more focused upon delivery themselves, rather than relying upon partners to deliver. This is both more ambitious and more challenging and has increased the demands upon steering groups.
- 1.39. Invest Local can strengthen local capacity but it also requires local capacity (including both people with skills, ideas, energy, passion and time, and also trust and constructive challenge, rather than destructive conflict, between people and local groups) to work effectively. Working in communities with less capacity is more challenging, takes longer and may be riskier. However, as the example of communities establishing their own anchor organisations illustrates, it also increases the impact of the programme, as the baseline level of capacity in these communities tended to be lower.
- 1.40. Looking beyond the establishment of steering groups and anchor organisations, the programme has enabled direct investments into a range of existing and, sometimes, new local groups and organisations and has often helped strengthen links between local groups and organisations. Moreover, as well as direct investments in local groups and organisations, by investing in community buildings the programme provides the spaces local groups and organisations and, also public and voluntary sector services such as Flying Start and the Citizens Advice Bureau, need to operate from. This increase in community capacity and infrastructure is, in turn, making a real difference to people's wellbeing and resilience.
- 1.41. However, there are inevitably questions about the long term sustainability of these investments, once the Invest Local funds are exhausted. For example, if their capacity has been strengthened (by their involvement with and support from Invest Local), local groups and organisations should be better placed to secure other types of funding to sustain community spaces, places and activities, but there is no guarantee of this. Similarly, the collective capacity and connectivity fostered by the programme should continue. However, there are dangers that when, for example, there is no longer Invest Local funding to

draw people to the table, they may struggle to prioritise this work over other demands upon their time and attention. Therefore, as well as exploring change over time, assessing the likely sustainability of this change will be a key line of inquiry in the next phase of the evaluation.

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