The role of money in an area based empowerment initiative

Overview
Previous area based initiatives have included varying degrees of financial investment and community involvement in decision making about how funding is used. Yet not a great deal is known about the health effects of funding programmes that aim to transfer power and decision making into the control of the community. Big Local is a Big Lottery funded programme in 150 areas across England. In each area, at least £1 million, as well as a range of support is made available for residents to make these places better places to live.

Aims
This briefing looks at the role of the funding in the initiative’s early stages:
- how the funding works to engage and connect residents locally
- funding for sustaining change
- challenges with the money

Features of Big Local’s funding model¹
- Areas selected for funding rather than through competition
- Overseen by a trust model independent of central government
  - Time and pace
  - Willingness to take risks
  - Flexibility and ‘light touch’ support
- Sustainability through making investment and maximising assets

Initial findings
- The funding has acted as a way of engaging and connecting residents. This has enabled new conversations around priority setting for neighbourhood action.
- The presence of funding has also helped residents to gain ‘a place at the table’ by opening up opportunities to negotiate with other agencies (e.g. the council) about priorities for the area.
- The rate of spend has often been slow as residents often feel very responsible about spending the funding. It has also taken time to build the relationships needed to use funds with other organisations.
- An emphasis has been placed in a number of areas on investing (not spending) funds as well actively seeking match funds.
- Some differences have also been apparent about how much funding should be used for running costs (e.g. employing a worker).
- Tensions have arisen where there are negative relations within communities or cynicism about similar initiatives. In some instances, external agencies have also not understood the ethos of community control over the funding.
- In some areas, funding has been viewed as felt to be place on deciding how the million should be spent rather than upon relationship building.

Communities in Control Study
Project Briefing #4
The Communities in Control (CiC) Study is evaluating the health inequalities impact of a Big Lottery funded initiative called Big Local. The initiative is being rolled out in 150 areas in England over at least ten years. Each area is receiving at least £1 million and a range of support to enable residents to make a positive difference to their local community.

CiC Phase 1 (Jan 2014 - Dec 2015) has produced learning about the initial stages of this initiative for public health practice and communities. It involved 140 interviews with residents and professionals and observations in 10 Big Local areas. This was supplemented by interviews with national programme leads. Phase 2 (Oct 2015 - March 2017) is assessing how collective control among residents is developing, as well as early health and social impacts for individuals and communities.

Relevance for health inequalities

When funding is transferred into the control of communities, this has potential to act as a mechanism for change in a number of different ways. This includes changes and experiences that take place during the processes of people coming together to make decisions about the local area (or through negotiating decisions with others) as well as the potential impact of what the funding is actually spent upon.

Understanding what it is about certain contexts that experience greater challenges than others in using the funding may also enable practitioners and communities to better anticipate challenges or support needs in future initiatives or funding arrangements.

Further information

The NIHR School for Public Health Research is a collaboration between: the Universities of Sheffield, Bristol, Cambridge, Exeter, UCL; The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine; the LiLaC collaboration between the Universities of Liverpool and Lancaster and Fuse: The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, a collaboration between Newcastle, Durham, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside Universities.

Big Local is managed by Local Trust.

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