SUMMARY REPORT PREPARED FOR LOCAL TRUST

A study of community engagement within the Big Local programme

NCVO RESEARCH

SEPTEMBER 2016

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Community Engagement in Big Local – Summary Report

This research was commissioned by Local Trust to explore various facets of community engagement, looking at similarities and differences between Big Local areas and teasing out what learning might be shared.

We developed five engagement wheels to help describe and understand different aspects of engagement in Big Local.[1]

- **Wheel 1 – Purpose: what are the drivers of community engagement in areas?**
  The first wheel is mostly about the purpose of engagement. We identified a number of drivers or reasons Big Local areas might seek to engage their wider community. Areas may define community engagement in several different ways and see it as having a number of purposes simultaneously or over time. The two factors that initially emerged as perhaps most common in the Big Local data were: *keeping people informed as a way of legitimising decisions and protecting against detractors*; and *tapping into a wider set of skills and resources to deliver Big Local*.

- **Wheel 2 – Context: what are the most relevant features of local context?**
  Local context is key to understanding how engagement is defined and practised, and how effective it is, with different factors acting as 'shapers', challenges, barriers, or enablers. The factors that initially emerged as perhaps the most relevant were *the plans and strategic focus of the area* and *size* and *nature of the community*, as well as the *influence, views and skills of the individuals involved* – e.g. the Rep or the Chair, or other members of the partnership. Whether or not areas had invested resources and employed a worker who may have responsibility for community engagement was also felt to be important.

- **Wheel 3 – Motivations: what motivates people to get involved?**
  The reasons we found for why people might engage with Big Local featured in the wheel resonated strongly with our wider knowledge of why people participate (e.g. relationships, helping others, personal benefit, influence). The motivations that seemed to emerge most strongly were: *getting to know others*; *responding to issues or causes that matter personally*; and *engaging because of belonging to, or wanting to connect across, an interest group* – particularly families with children.

- **Wheel 4 – Approaches: what are areas doing?**
  Areas could be using any combination of nine broad community engagement approaches (rather than specific methods or activities) to engagement. Areas ranked the following as most effective: *communications and conversations*; *community events and celebrations*; and *targeted work*. All three in some way focus on building social capital.

- **Wheel 5 – Effectiveness: what does effective practice look like?**
  Workshop participants were asked to identify what they felt was effective practice and asked why they considered this to be the case, from which we summarised the key characteristics in the wheel 5. There was quite a spread on the factors that case study areas identified as important in making practice effective, with *visible results* being the most popular. This also came across strongly in interviews. By pointing to tangible projects or successful campaigns it was felt to be easier to get more people on board.

Main findings of the research

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[1] The wheels are presented in full in chapter 2 of the main report.

We identified a number of salient points about what helps to shape and enable community engagement in Big Local, as well as key challenges. These are grouped into the three thematic areas: breadth and depth of participation; the timeframe of Big Local; and pragmatism/the programme's flexibility.

a) Recognising the importance of both breadth and depth of participation in Big Local

Ultimately, Big Local needs to benefit the whole community. The following different categories of participation were mapped out: partnership members; additional volunteers; direct beneficiaries; and the wider community.

The importance of having a multitude and diversity of these 'entry points' was repeatedly emphasised, although the majority will have low-intensity engagement with Big Local, such as attending an event or group. To get people involved, the areas needed to provide not only varied, but meaningful[2] opportunities. Breadth was also about *who* was involved – were all parts of the area participating? Did participants reflect the diversity of an area in terms of age and ethnicity? *Targeted work* was highlighted as an important way to engage as many people as possible, from different demographics.

In order for Big Local to function, there needs to be a 'core' of volunteers with a deeper level of engagement; this was not limited to the partnership. With many of the areas examined in the early stage of delivery, there was a need for an increased number of volunteers, beyond the partnership itself, something that could affect community engagement going forward.

b) Ramifications of the Big Local timeframe

As areas moved into delivery, inevitably different challenges arose. There was often a need to expand capacity, either through additional volunteers or through paid workers. In addition, with the consultation period having been completed, the need to consult large numbers of residents often reduced, because it was felt the plan already had a 'mandate'. There were notable exceptions to this, such as large-scale participatory budgeting, which could often lead to a greater emphasis on the depth of engagement and more face-to-face interaction.

While the interviewees did not use the term social capital, their discussions about how engagement would build over time very much fitted with the concept, including building trust and networks. Many Big Local areas had low levels of community engagement before Big Local, and almost no community groups. For these areas the early years of Big Local will be spent building social capital, in the sense of creating activities where residents interact.

The length of the Big Local programme means that durable networks and groups can potentially be created. The length of time also brings challenges: keeping people engaged over time and continuing to attract new people is not easy. Building momentum was important for areas and there may well be a critical mass of activity, such as Big Local events, activities or the development of a space, that leads to recognition and engagement from the wider community. For some, sustainability was explicitly about empowering the community so that they would not always be dependent on external initiatives in the future and that the mutual support developed in Big Local would lessen the need for this.

c) The importance of pragmatism and flexibility

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[2] This is where the motivations of the volunteer are well matched with the opportunity, to ensure that both the volunteer and the partnership get something out of the role in a mutually beneficial relationship.

The flexibility of Big Local, in the sense that it is not a highly prescriptive programme in terms of how it is delivered and what the money is spent on, meant there was a great deal of diversity in how the partnerships engaged with the community.

As might be expected from a resident-led programme, our Big Local case studies have not had homogenous approaches to engagement. Indeed, within most of the areas there had been fluidity in their approaches, which has changed over time, and evidence of pragmatism was observed, with areas changing things and trying something different if things were not working.

There is a learning culture and one of sharing between Big Local areas, which was evident in this research. For example, areas had adopted participatory budgeting and community researchers because they heard about it from another area through a Big Local event. What is notable is how differently these can be applied in practice. For example, participatory budgeting can vary greatly by types of voting system and the amount of money on offer; by the same token a community hub could be the focus of Big Local in the area or be more peripheral.

Implications

We identified the following implications arising from the research.

- *Particular challenges around volunteer-led organisations*
  Big Local provides some substantial volunteer opportunities, with one partnership member describing it as a 'meaty' role. However, a potential downside is the absence of formal volunteer management practices, or rather aspects of it. While this is not to suggest that areas should blindly adopt the systems and processes evident in much volunteering good practice, there is nonetheless great value in ensuring that volunteers are well-supported, understand their role, and are appropriately matched to roles. Linked to this is the challenge of recruiting new volunteers and retaining existing ones. Most of the existing guidance is for organisations where paid staff recruit volunteers into existing roles and as such it would be helpful to develop guidance tailored to need of volunteer-led groups and organisations. Ultimately people need to enjoy participation and conviviality remains important – people need to get on with each other. The prominence of social activities and groups in Big Local is a key ingredient in this. Yet there also needs to be mechanisms that help conflict resolution.

- *The resource intensiveness of face-to-face interaction*
  This report echoes other Big Local research about how partnerships tend to prefer face-to-face interaction and find it the most effective way to engage people. However, this can be incredibly resource intensive in terms of pressures on volunteers' time and capacity. One way of addressing this might be engaging paid workers and/or increasing their hours (see below).

- *'Beneficiaries' with little direct involvement in Big Local*
  As Big Local progresses, there will be increasing wider community benefit from Big Local activities, including for those with no direct involvement in Big Local. Some of the more active volunteers struggled with the notion that they would be putting a lot of effort in what others might benefit from without contributing anything, which might be described as a fear of 'freeloaders'. Although this feeling was not universally shared it tended to manifest itself in the expressed need for more volunteers or people with ideas for activities to come forward.

- *Potential of community spaces and hubs*
  Not all areas had meeting spaces or hubs. Those that did found them extremely useful in supporting Big Local activities and community life more generally. The importance of physical spaces for engagement was highlighted in NCVO's *Pathways through Participation* research.

- *Role of workers*
  Future research on paid workers in Big Local is warranted, to examine how their role and influence might develop and increase. Their relationships with residents/volunteers could also differ, as did whether they are from/based in the area.

- *Areas and groups not engaged*
  Although not identified by all case study areas as a major issue, some partnerships were struggling to engage all parts of the area and all demographic groups. There were instances where certain groups had been unresponsive despite targeted work and the partnerships could sometimes wonder whether there was a point at which they needed to give up. It might be that more assistance could be provided to engage non-responsive groups.