

Big Local: Beyond the Early Years

Summary Evaluation Report of Our Bigger Story: The
Longitudinal Multi Media Evaluation of Big Local

2015 – 2016

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Big Local: Beyond the Early Years

This report, commissioned by Local Trust, summarises the learning from 15 urban, rural and seaside Big Local areas involved in the longitudinal, multi-media evaluation of Big Local – Our Bigger Story- over 2015 and 2016. It explores the approach, delivery, outcomes, impact and influence of Big Local across those 15 areas, and the principles that underpin Big Local as a resident-led, asset -based approach to place-based development.

In addition, the report examines Big Local’s capacity to *negotiate change*, the extent to which Big Local areas are a *catalyst for change*, the development of *community leadership and influence*, their experience in dealing with *expectations* around ‘achievement’ and understanding about *sustainability and legacy*.

The 15 Our Bigger Story Big Local areas are:

Barrowcliff, Birchfield, Blackpool Revoe, Bountagu, Catton Grove, Grassland Hasmoor, Growing Together, Hanwell, Lawrence Weston, North Northfleet, Radstock and Westfield, Ramsey Million, Three Parishes, Whitley Bay, and Westfield, Sheffield.

We would like to thank all the residents who have contributed to the evaluation.

Introduction

‘My main priority is that power sits with the community and that the needs and ideas are generated from the community.’ (Partnership member)

All 15 areas involved with Our Bigger Story are at different stages in their Big Local journey. For example, Barrowcliff and Growing Together have spent over half their allocated ‘million’, whilst Blackpool Revoe has only started to deliver activities against its plan (agreed in December 2015) over the summer of 2016.

Big Local has four well publicised outcomes set at the outset which express the aspirations of the programme as a whole. They are intended to articulate the underlying ethos of Big Local in that it is resident led – with local residents both identifying needs and then designing community plans that tailor responses to specific communities. This contrasts with many previous community change and regeneration initiatives in which solutions were ‘imposed’ from the outside against pre-determined policy objectives and targets.

The four Big Local outcomes are:

- Communities being better able to identify local needs and take action in response to them.
- People having increased skills and confidence, so that they continue to identify and respond to needs in the future.
- The community is making a difference to the needs it prioritises.
- People feel that their area is an even better place to live.

These four outcomes overlap and are, therefore, not necessarily individually meaningful for residents in Big Local areas. Where areas have talked about making a difference, this has often been grounded in responding to real, rather than assumed, needs identified by the community.

What's working? Progress towards the Big Local outcomes

Progress against each outcome:

- **Communities being better able to identify local needs and take action in response to them:** Big Local partnerships, in the plan development stage, undertook a wide range of consultation activities. As they have moved into delivery this has been less of a priority, though partnerships are aware of the need to keep the wider community informed and engaged.
- **People having increased skills and confidence, so that they continue to identify and respond to needs in the future:** There is evidence that the majority of partnerships and the individuals involved have developed the confidence to take difficult and complex decisions. Big Local partnerships, often through delivery partners, are developing the skills of local residents (e.g. access to employment) and the capacity of community groups locally.
- **The community is making a difference to the needs it prioritises:** Big Local partnerships have, in some instances, already made a difference to the physical environment locally (e.g. [green spaces/play areas](#)) or have plans to do so where this has been identified as a priority. Individuals interviewed also reported that involvement with the partnership (or Big Local supported projects) had made a difference to their physical and mental wellbeing.
- **People feel that their area is an even better place:** Residents and partners report a range of 'soft' outcomes in relationship to this goal; the area had more activities – or services that were under threat had been protected. A greater level of community cohesion, reduced levels of social isolation and a better feeling about the community were also reported in some Big Locals.

Big Local areas are working on diverse issues to address these outcomes and the needs expressed by their communities. Nevertheless, Big Local actions in the Our Bigger Story sample can be clustered around five key themes: environmental improvements; promoting health and wellbeing; strengthening and celebrating a sense of community; stimulating new activities which meet local needs and; work with children and young people.

The partnerships have also adopted different delivery strategies. These range from:

- A community development approach aimed at creating more 'neighbourliness', pride in the community and stimulating small scale community activities led by residents (e.g. [Bountagu](#)).
- The use of small grants to stimulate or extend community based activity (e.g. [Radstock](#), [Whitley Bay](#) and [Three Parishes](#)).
- Project/service delivery funding through larger/established voluntary organisations –through grants and commissioning (e.g. Blackpool Revue, Catton Grove, Growing Together) or Service Level Agreements (e.g. Hanwell) with a system of payment in-arrears against outcomes.
- A focus on delivering substantial capital projects (e.g. Barrowcliff) or have plans to do so (e.g. Grassland Hasmoor).
- Brokerage – improving the co-ordination of existing local groups and services (e.g. Whitley Bay, [Ramsey](#)).
- Acting as strategic change agents – through aiming to attract substantial inward investment and radical physical change within the area ([Lawrence Weston](#)), or
- A combination of all, or some, of the above.

Overall, progress against outcomes has been slower than anticipated and uneven. Whilst some have achieved their early objectives others have struggled or become ‘bogged down’ in issues of governance and partnership incorporation. Partnerships also report challenges in terms of engaging the wider community in the working of Big Local and can struggle to connect everyday activities in their area with their strategic vision for the area.

Reflecting on progress to date, the key learning includes:

- Change, and embedding Big Local as a way of working, takes time and is not a linear process.
- Measuring the impact of, and attributing change to, Big Local beyond anecdotal evidence is inevitably a challenge- something that is common to many previous area-based programmes.
- Maintaining wider community engagement in partnership working can be challenging.

Individuals and groups involved valued:

- The more open ended commitment of Big Local and delivery partners in a time when the policy emphasis is on brief interventions;
- Tailored support via Big Local reps and Local Trust rather than ‘one size fits all’;
- Being respected and not being judged.

How Big Local Works

‘Big Local is a positive way for people to take ownership of where they live... people who hadn’t worked together are now working together... actually they are delivering’

As noted, areas in the sample are very different in that they are:

- addressing different issues;
- operating in very different local contexts and with different histories;
- taking different approaches to delivery.

They do, however, share certain common characteristics. Each area has established Big Local partnerships in which the majority of members are local residents. Most have adopted fairly traditional models of governance with formal meetings and committee/sub-committee structures. All have now appointed workers to support the partnership and delivery. Further, once operational, partnership members note the complexities of managing the Big Local work and have described this as a ‘steep learning curve’.

Balancing residents’ management of the strategic direction of Big Local and becoming involved in the oversight of day to day delivery issues is also challenging. Many partnerships have been found to be risk averse (both in their governance and spending). This, however, reflects the level of accountability to the community partnership members feel around managing Big Local funds.

Partnership members are passionate about their involvement in Big Local and their community. This is reflected in the substantial amounts of time they commit to partnership activity – as well as other voluntary action in their community. That passion can, however, result in tensions and conflict between residents. Equally, partnership relationships with external bodies, in particular local authorities, vary. There are those that have developed close partnership arrangements (Whitley Bay), but there are others where contact is very limited or fraught with difficulty, where local authorities (in the view of partners) do not understand the resident led ethos of Big Local.

Big Local, as a 'light touch' programme, supports partnerships through:

- Locally Trusted Organisations (LTOs) which are charged with taking on the routine management tasks (e.g. employing workers/overseeing finances). There are those LTOs that are pro-active in their relationship with partnerships. In other cases, however, the relationship has been less successful – either in terms of LTOs delivering what partners expect or because those organisations are, themselves, financially fragile.
- Each area has a Big Local rep. Their role has changed as Big Local areas have become operational. In the early development stage this was supporting partnerships in community engagement, profiling and plan development. Increasingly they act as a sounding board for partnership ideas and delivery and are a source of expert, objective, advice or sign-posting. As with LTOs, reps can play a very active role in the workings of the partnership or adopt a more 'hands off' approach unless there are particular problems.
- Equally, the role of paid workers varies. There are those who play a largely administrative role, those who undertake community and organisational development tasks or manage communications. Others provide an oversight of delivery. Partnerships reported that workers could be a valuable resource, freeing up time from routine tasks and co-ordinating activity.

Local Trust provides overall programme oversight and has, over time, refined guidance to Big Local areas and stream-lined reporting requirements in ways which areas have generally found helpful. However, others have felt that they could benefit from a clearer 'steer' from Local Trust on how to deliver the programme. What partnerships do value (where they take advantage of these), are networking and peer learning opportunities co-ordinated by Local Trust. These helped local residents see 'a bigger picture' beyond their immediate locality.

Big Local as a Lasting Change Agent

'Compared to other groups, Big Local is as good as it gets'. (Local Councillor)

The evaluation has explored local processes which facilitate working towards achieving the Big Local outcomes. These include:

- Big Local areas' capacity to *negotiate change*;
- The extent to which Big Locals are a *catalyst for change*;
- The development of *community leadership and influence*;
- Dealing with *expectations* around what can be 'achieved';
- Understanding *sustainability and legacy*.

The Big Local approach is underpinned by the concept that resident-led action is a **catalyst for change** as well as a mechanism for managing that change. As with progress against outcomes, the picture across the 15 areas is mixed, from the physical evidence of the difference Big Local has already made, through to long term plans for the physical transformation of parts of an estate. Partnerships also talk of the soft changes that are taking place around how people feel and think about their community. In those areas predominantly using small grants, change is identified at a micro-level for individuals and small scale community activity. The extent to which Big Local partnerships act as a change agent may depend on a strong strategic vision with pertinent activities, both large and small, along the way.

Grassland Hasmoor Big Local: Pit Stop Diner

This initiative is delivered by volunteers and was originally set up by Grassland Hasmoor Big Local (GHBL) working with Public Health Adult Care. The Pit Stop Diner is open on the first Saturday of every month at Grassmoor Community Centre. A team of around 15 volunteers deliver the project with support from GHBL and Public Health.

The team receive the delivery on a Tuesday ready for creating the menu and putting on Facebook to publicise. On the Friday volunteers pick up excess surplus food from Tesco. The event takes place on the Saturday - this is when volunteers are at full capacity.

The event strives to bring residents of different backgrounds to come along, enjoy a meal and socialise with other members of their community. The dedicated volunteers at the diner are a mix of young people looking to gain experience and who can learn new skills from the more experienced volunteers.

The original idea was to provide a meal and help to alleviate poverty in the area. However, the Pit Stop Diner is open to all and was not set up solely for poverty-related issues, it is also the social enrichment aspect that is highly valued and key to many residents that attend. The Pit Stop Diner now strives to cultivate community cohesion and improve health and well-being for the local communities - creating lasting change and developing community spirit.

Growing Together Big Local: Youth Work

Creating new opportunities for young people has become the principal focus of the Growing Together programme. In part this is due to a widespread belief among partnership members and in the wider community that improving the life-chances of the youngest members of the community is probably the most effective way to bring about lasting improvements to the estates. There is also an awareness that the other side of investing in young people is reducing anti-social behaviour. Growing Together has:

- paid for four new play areas and bought two youth shelters, each with its own exercise equipment
- funded youth clubs run by Free 2 Talk, paid for adventurous outdoor activity youth programmes run by [Change of Scene](#), contributed to Reelscape's film based youth programmes, covered the cost of Impact Now's education support youth work on three estates, and given a grant to the Scouts
- made 29 small grants to organisations working with children or teenagers

In total there were 3,568 young people reported as using Growing Together funded children's and youth activities.

'If we hadn't had the money, then the situation now would be very different. The play areas and youth shelters wouldn't be there and the Junior Wardens programme might not be running. There would have been no Free 2 Talk activity on Blackthorn ... We wouldn't be where we are now and I think the challenges would be greater. I've got nothing but good to say of how the money's been used'. (Delivery Partner)

Ramsey Heritage Project

Ramsey has many historical and natural attractions as well as a wide selection of independent retailers. This project aims to inject some vitality into the town, bring visitors into the area, increase footfall in the town and spending in local shops, as well as encouraging local people to have pride in their town and the surrounding villages and Fen landscape.

With its own branding, *Discover Ramsey* has organised a number of events over the last two years, brought the different heritage groups together, and created a dedicated website to profile the history and help people get the most out of visiting Ramsey.

In 2016, two events held in September helped put *Discover Ramsey* on the map. The first was free entry to seven heritage venues with a vintage bus taking people round all the sites. Visitor numbers at all the heritage sites were more than ever before. At the second, Craft Saturday event there were more than 30 stalls, people brand new to trading interspersed with more experienced traders. They were busy all day as were the local shops who posted on Facebook that this was their best trade ever; *It brought a buzz to the town.*

This is not just about visitors. The Big Local's money and expertise is investing in encouraging more residents to come out of their houses, and they see this as opening up local volunteering opportunities.

A catalyst for connections and community activity in Whitley Bay

Through Big Local, people in Whitley Bay are better connected and taking part in activities together. People with different interests have connected through Big Local. Connections are sometimes catalysed by Big Local funding which has helped to make things happen, but also just by being there; *'we wouldn't have had the conversations if Big Local hadn't been here'*. People who got involved in one thing have made connections with others – Big Local has enabled people to make more of what they have got, helping each other to unlock resources.

Residents and agencies say people are talking together in a much more constructive way. This includes turning around the community's relationship with the council; *'Big Local gives residents a voice'*, and communication at strategic level is greatly improved.

'I believe that the Big Local to a very large extent, has been a significant catalyst for change in Whitley Bay and has sown a large number of seeds'. (Local resident)

Westfield Big Local gets a community space

'And it's a big thing, because it's the only thing this community's got. We haven't got a doctors, we haven't got a library, we haven't got a church, we've got nothing.' (Partnership member)

Westfield is an outer estate, 8 miles from the centre of Sheffield. There are few facilities on the estate; in the last year the doctors' surgery closed for the second time. The only community facility, the Com.Unity Centre, is a community centre based in an old pub building, run for many years by the local authority. Primarily used as a youth centre, it was only open at limited times each week, and despite banks of computers, a gym, a café and meeting space, was underused by the local community.

Westfield Big Local has prioritised taking on the management of the Com.Unity Centre. It is now open every day – but it has been a turbulent journey. It has taken two and a half years of 'hard nosed bargaining,' a lot of this time taken up with toing and froing with the legal department in the council. Negotiations with the council have been protracted – resisting the rent payments originally specified, alongside restrictions to its use. The residents were supported through a pro bono solicitor and a surveyor from Sheffield Hallam University. This meant they were able to present a lot of documentation about the condition of the building.

The group also benefited from the advice of a Social Investment Rep who helped with understanding building regulations.

Bountagu Big Local: Community Hub

The community hub is a physical space housed in an old betting shop in a parade of shops, but in fact has generated a community spirit which extends much more widely.

For a small space, a lot goes on. Mondays it's information and advice and help with form filling, an afternoon tea, an over 50s lunch; Tuesday offers conversational English, IT skills and Hang Out youth club; Wednesday brings a job club, coffee morning, Wi-Fi support, enterprise and business support, young people's enterprise club, Thursdays include a drop-in, Hang Out youth club, youth forum, and on Fridays there is a coffee morning, a befriending programme and keep fit.

A key **outcome is in the connections people make**- finding out what they need, and then finding ways to help. *'So it is kind of making them personally happier, more contented, and it is also about making them proud to live here again, because for the last 30 years or so, people have felt ashamed to live here, rather than proud to live here. So it is about the whole community, and it is also about individuals. ...It makes them feel important as well.'* (Partnership member)

Residents note that people in the area seem more relaxed, friendly and smile more. *'We see that people stop out here, they look in the window yes, but they are actually now talking to each other, so it is a kind of talking point, even if they don't come in. And they bring stuff in give it to us to give to the community'*. (Partnership member)

Barrowcliff - the biggest loser and a winning community

Barrowcliff Big Local funded Scarborough fitness centre, Compass Gym, to run an innovative weight-loss project, The Biggest Loser, in the heart of the community. 40 plus local residents embraced the challenge to get active and transform their lives. This directly resulted in:

- a collective total weight loss of 138.9lbs - one pound short of 10 stones, and 924 centimetres lost.

But the story goes further than this:

- **community links:** Barrowcliff Big Local is concerned about the extent of loneliness in the area and aware that people will cross the road rather than speak to each other. The project has brought people together, they walk home from the sessions together; and to inject a bit of motivation, the project participants were split into teams which meant they supported each other to lose weight
- **individual benefit:** one young person, on a 'Uniformed Services' college course, wanted to join the armed services but was overweight and therefore didn't meet the criteria. Motivated by the Biggest Loser project, he lost 2 stones in weight and started a new job in the army.

What next? Barrowcliff Big Local will run the project again, and already has 30 people signed up. It recognises though that they need to reach out beyond the 'same' people – they could have 20 people who are healthy and fit, but want to reach the other 1,200 people on the estate. This is their biggest challenge.

Making a difference for projects – a community allotment in Birchfield

The community allotment actually got going and was very successful. We pick up people who've got learning difficulties from local hostels and we take them along to the allotment, and we've now got a manager of the

allotment who works 16 hours and we show them how to grow food, how to cook it when it's grown, on wet days we do art groups with them, you know, we get them involved with the earth and with all that that means to them, but one of the offshoots of that was we decided to take part in Britain in Bloom, It's Your Neighbourhood. **That's had a really, really big impact...**

We were getting little bits of grants from all over the place, so the manager was spending a lot of his time continually applying for bits of grants to keep it going, but when Big Local started we actually got a grant from them which meant he knew that he had an income for two years..... and we could get on with actually doing stuff in the community. So we expanded the allotment project, we started to do a lunch club where people in the local community could drop in, get some food that we'd grown on the allotment, and meet other people in the community.

Because we'd got so many people involved coming along, we had four or five open days where people could come along and make hanging baskets, plant pots up, and we gave them all material and showed them how to do it, and we actually involved about 500 people. And it's quite a small area, Birchfield, so that's a lot of people to involve from a small area. (Partnership member)

Blackpool Revoe: Tackling the 'hard' issues.

Blackpool Revoe (The Revoelution) is amongst the 10 most deprived neighbourhoods in England. In both the Revoe [Community Profile](#) in early 2014 and the subsequent [Community Plan](#) (December 2015) there was a consensus amongst residents that the key issue in the neighbourhood was the misuse of illegal drugs. There has been, however, no agreement on the solution to this issue. For some, including the partnership, those using illegal substances needed earlier interventions and support – particularly given lengthy waiting times for treatment. For others, who reported feeling unsafe on the streets (particularly at night) the answer was 'getting rid of the druggies.' The tensions around this issue were evident at the Revoelution's final [plan consultation meeting](#) in December 2015.

After extensive consultations and negotiations, they adopted a twin approach. The Revoelution is supporting a range of community safety measures – including CCTV and improving shop front security, **and** is supporting the Hepatitis C local drop in sessions and has commissioned drug support and life coaching services.

'Some people in this area have given up and can't see any way out of anything. A revo(e)lution is about change and we'd like them to have that hope – to be able to change.' (Partnership member)

An even better place to live: a long-term strategic vision

Lawrence Weston Big Local has delivered a range of, often relatively small scale, improvements on the estate. These have included improving static play equipment areas, supporting the community café at the local Baptist Church ([Café on the Cross](#)), developing employment support and opening a community shop where residents sell arts, crafts and other goods.

This, however, is only part of their longer term, strategic vision, for making Lawrence Weston an even better place to live. That strategic vision has two key elements: **Lawrence Weston as a greener place to live:** with the Big Local investing, with Bristol Energy Co-operative in:

- energy audits on the estate and encouraging residents to take energy efficiency measures
- wind turbines and a solar farm. It is anticipated this will deliver greener energy for the estate and bring a £25,000 return on that investment for the benefit of Lawrence Weston

New mixed development: using the large area of derelict land in the middle of the estate, there are plans for a new supermarket, new homes (including some community led housing) and a community hub which would also accommodate the GP surgery and other local services.

The progress made in Lawrence Weston can be viewed in two films made in 2015 and ['Projects for Change'](#) in late [2016](#).

Big Local areas are, themselves, changing. In urban areas, new communities have continued to arrive since the inception of the programme. In rural areas, new housing development has resulted in incomers who tend to be out-commuters. Partnerships are aware of these changes, though often unsure of how best to respond to them. Those which have refreshed their original community plans have tended not to radically alter their original plan on the assumption that it is still relatively early days and activities against plans need time to 'bed in'.

Big Local partnerships see the principle of resident led community development as important and talk of developing a **collective leadership** in terms of decision making. The realities are more complex. Residents constitute the majority on the partnerships in all 15 areas involved in the evaluation. However, they also wear other, sometimes multiple, hats: they may both live and work as professionals in the neighbourhood, some are also elected members or local authority officers as well as residents. In terms of decision making there is also a complex interaction between residents, workers and reps – with instances where resident partners defer to the professionals in the room.

A common narrative from partnerships is that their community is a forgotten area. Some have, however, been strategic in gaining influence by using Big Local money either for financial leverage and/or as a way to be taken seriously by the local authority and other external agencies. Some, particularly rural, Big Locals feel they are too far away from where decisions really get made or the scale of other developments are on a level which makes it hard for them to influence (see for example the development of Ebbsfleet Garden City next to Northfleet in Kent).

Big Local partnerships express different views on the **expectations** placed on them and what they can reasonably achieve. For example, some partnership members are aware that *'£1 million is a lot of money in a community like this'* whilst others comment that Big Local funds amounted to *'£10 for each resident a year – or £100 over the 10 years'* and caution against unrealistic expectations of what might be achieved in the current climate of austerity.

All the areas involved in Our Bigger Story are less than half way through their Big Local Journey. Issues of **legacy and sustainability** are, nonetheless, high on their agenda. Different strategies are being adopted. Some areas are exploring incorporation as a way of attracting future funds and managing community assets in the hope of becoming a sustainable organisation. For others, the legacy consists of physical and environmental improvements. Still others see their legacy as cultural: more people in the community having the confidence and skills to take action long into the future. Which approach leads to a lasting legacy or a sustainable organisation (something not originally envisaged of the programme) will require careful evaluation in the coming years.

There is no neat, single, typology of the Big Local areas studied. Areas are neither wholly one 'thing' nor another. Rather they operate across multiple dimensions and on a continuum and their position against any one dimension may change over time. Spending priorities, and how spend is allocated may change (from small grants to a more commissioning based model). Governance can shift from very open models to more proscribed structures – and back again as partnerships try and refresh their membership. Some, such as Barrowcliff, have moved from predominantly capital spend to revenue expenditure, whilst others currently spending on projects are beginning to think of substantial capital investment in a community hub or asset.

The following table is not 'exhaustive' but aims to give a 'flavour' of the different dimensions Big Local partnerships operate across, with differing points on that continuum:

Different continuums of partnership working

'Open' membership/governance	↔	'Closed' membership/governance
Responding to immediate needs	↔	Aspirations focused /strategic vision
Small grants	↔	Commissioning/contracting of substantial activity
Inward facing	↔	Outward looking
Capital spend	↔	Revenue spend
Risk averse	↔	Risk taking
Investment focused	↔	Spend focused
Community development focused	↔	Project focused
Protecting what already exists	↔	Change agent
Enterprise model	↔	Charity/model

Balancing Acts

Big Local partnerships are having to negotiate a series of often complex balancing acts in terms of working to achieve their long term outcomes. At the most basic level, this is the tension between being seen to be doing something in their community now – as opposed to achieving more ambitious objectives in the long term. Examples of these balancing acts include:

- The ambitions and vision of Big Local and the realities of day-to-day delivery.
- Community wants and community needs.
- Having a hyper-local focus and/or an outward looking orientation.
- Accountability, risk and innovation.
- Freedoms and flexibilities contrasted with clear advice.

Partnerships appear to be working more effectively where day-to-day management and activities are underpinned by that **long-term vision**. The partnership is also visible to the community – often through running, supporting or having a presence at large scale community events, rather than operating behind closed doors and expecting the community to come to them. Balancing the Big Local task with the social functions of partnership working are critical factors in sustaining engagement.

Big Local areas are also balancing **needs and wants**. Is what a community (or just the most vocal part of that community) wants what is actually needed? Residents may agree about 'the problem' but be divided on the solution. In [Blackpool Revoe](#), for instance, the agreed problem is visible substance misuse. What is needed, for some, is to move the problem away – for others it is the provision of advice and support pending treatment options. Partnerships, particularly in the most deprived areas, are also having to balance competing needs and growing demand on local services.

Big Local is intended as a catalyst for change – bringing about positive new developments in their area. However, in the current economic climate, they can take on the role of protecting the status quo: substituting for services cut by the local authority or trying to protect existing assets which are

under threat of closure (such as a library or youth club). With further changes to local government finance, these tensions are likely to increase in the coming years.

Managing Big Local at the local level requires constant judgements – wanting to be innovative but at the same time ensuring that resources are *‘safe in the partnership’s hands’*. Partnership members are required to make complex, often difficult, decisions which affect their immediate neighbours. They are balancing competing demands for their time – and Big Local resources. Big Local can, as one partnership diary keeper in the evaluation noted, be fun as well as hard work. What is impressive, especially in these hard times, is the commitment of resident partners to **‘the long haul’** and hanging onto the belief, or hope, they can indeed make their community an even better place to live.

Partnerships can be quite inward looking – focusing on their immediate area. Such a **hyper-local** approach can be valued by residents in that services are delivered at the very local level. However, these are the partnerships which tend to be struggling to see **‘the bigger picture’** of the broader contexts in which Big Local is operating, and may lack influence with those in power who make decisions about their community.

Thinking Back and Looking Forward

‘Big Local is paving the way for change because it is resident owned and residents are making the choices about change. It is not just agencies parachuting in’.

As noted, how each area is working towards the four Big Local outcomes differs not only in approach, but in the scale of the challenges they face: from highly deprived neighbourhoods such as Revoe, through to those where poverty is a feature (and sometimes hidden) amidst relative affluence.

For all their variety, there is evidence that Big Local has been a catalyst for change. This applies to physical and environmental improvements (Barrowcliff) as much as around stimulating new activities or building a stronger sense of community (Bountagu and Hanwell). In some areas, progress has been slower and partnerships have struggled to turn their original vision into delivery on the ground: *...we need to be patient as the wheels of positive change are slow moving. Things don’t change overnight.* (Partnership member)

The flip side of acting as a change agent has been, in the face of continuing austerity measures, attempts by Big Local partnerships to protect services and community assets which are under threat – in particular, community buildings, play and youth services.

Again, as anticipated, progress has not been linear. Periods of intense activity in some areas have then been followed by a slower pace of change – and vice versa. Despite this, partnership members repeatedly talk of the Big Local, and the Big Local approach, becoming more embedded in the community.

The Future

‘A million pounds over 10 years is canny but it takes an awful lot of energy from an awful lot of people to do that’. (Partnership member)

As a programme lasting at least ten years, Big Local begs three big questions:

- How long is sufficient to demonstrate positive outcomes and impact?
- How is/can residents' commitment be sustained and refreshed over a decade, particularly in those areas where there are, or have been, tensions and conflicts?
- How big an 'ask' is Big Local of individual residents and local communities?

The 2016 Local Trust survey of partnership members found that partners did not find their role 'burdensome'. However, the shared narrative (across all 15 areas involved in Our Bigger Story) has been that they found their role onerous. This applies in terms of time commitments, particularly where partnership members have been drawn in to operational management, conflict mediation and monitoring as well as fulfilling strategic roles.

The 'big ask' is more complex than simply a matter of time demands. The learning necessary to manage a £1m community based programme can be very demanding and technical: finding out about planning permissions, tendering processes, asset transfer and Pre Qualifying Questionnaires to take on the management of local services. Furthermore, the scale of expectations and responsibilities also plays out at an emotional level. Whilst there is a history of tensions and conflicts in earlier area-based Initiatives, this has often been between residents and paid officials. As a resident-led initiative, tensions and conflict in Big Local areas can be qualitatively different. Conflict is not between local people and some remote authority – but, potentially, between near neighbours. How these tensions and conflicts managed and resolved without individuals either leaving the partnership or, indeed, the local area is a challenge.

Residents take their responsibilities very seriously and this creates a pressure to 'deliver' which can weigh heavily on partnership members. Residents active on partnerships talked, repeatedly, of this being a steep '*learning curve*' – particularly in the transition from plan development to delivery. Being involved in Big Local partnerships is demanding and, as noted, requires residents to manage, or 'balance', often completing agendas and demands.

So what is it that keeps them going? There are positive experiences, repeatedly mentioned, around building personal confidence and developing new skills and knowledge, or simply the social aspects of partnerships. In some instances local residents have moved into being employed by Big Local or other agencies in the locality.

Linked to the 'big ask' is the issue of legacy. There are those for whom legacy is about cultural change; building the skills and confidence of residents to take action, with some looking to their LTOs continuing as the local strategic body which can support resident action. Others such as Lawrence Weston and Birchfield are looking at neighbourhood planning as a way forward, managing assets and leaving behind a sustainable organisation. Others are discussing incorporation of the partnership as a legal entity as a means of securing and managing future resources, something not necessarily envisaged in the Big Local approach.

Looking forward, legacy will become an increasingly important issue over the coming three years as some areas move towards having used all their Big Local money. How the process is managed is likely to bring an added layer of complexity to decision making processes in Big Local areas: what to stop funding or what to prioritise in areas where there are increasing, and competing, needs with ever fewer resources.

In thinking about the future, areas have reached a point of what could be described as a fragile maturity. Fragile in the sense that partnerships in the delivery phase are reliant on a few people –

and in some cases, reliant on a handful of already overstretched activists; maturity in the sense that partnerships are more confident in taking difficult decisions.

Perhaps the most important emerging question is, 'what, fundamentally, is Big Local?' Is it about structures and governance – with partnerships becoming incorporated bodies? Is it another funding stream that will come to an end? Alternatively, is Big Local about broader community change - an initiative which is actually about fostering a culture in which local people feel (whatever structures are, or are not, left behind; whatever funding is, or is not, available) they have a greater influence and control over their lives – their community is, indeed, an even better place to live? Finally, does Big Local have the scope to become a wider movement – over and above the work in individual areas?

This, in turn, is a challenge for the future evaluation activity of Our Bigger Story. What has been built up over the last two years is a greater understanding of how Big Local partnerships are operating and are implementing the aspirations of resident-led change. Further, there is a growing body of evidence of the changes partnerships and delivery partners are effecting for individuals within their communities in terms of confidence, wellbeing and, in a number of cases, access to employment. What, however, are the wider ripple effects of Big Local as an ethos and way of working in the wider community – on those people who are neither active on partnerships nor accessing directly those services supported by Big Local funding, and on the wider array of institutions influencing a community, such as public bodies and private sector interests?

Further information

A full version of this summary report, along with an e-book format, is available at <http://ourbiggerstory.com/reports.php>

Films about all 15 areas involved in Our Bigger Story can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/ourbiggerstory/residents-stories> along with multi media material produced by those areas themselves. This is available to search at <http://ourbiggerstory.com/#>.

Seven summative films covering Big Local outcomes, the experience of being a Big Local Partner and the themes identified in this summary (Big Local as a *catalyst for change*; *negotiate change*; *community leadership and influence*, *Expectations and sustainability and legacy*) are available at <http://ourbiggerstory.com/reports.php>

For more stories of change in Big Local areas visit www.ourbiggerstory.com

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