RESEARCH INTO THE IMPACT OF BIG LOCAL:
IMPACTS FOUND

May 2016

Introduction

Resources for Change was commissioned to undertake research "To capture the impact, achievements and learning of some of the earliest plans to be endorsed to demonstrate what the Big Local model has been able to achieve and draw out learning for other Big Local areas moving into delivery". Additionally, the researchers investigated how areas are measuring impact.

20 Big Local areas were chosen from the first 50 endorsed plans, and researchers agreed a focus topic for the impact research with each area, e.g. children and young people, environment, economy and employment. The research team reviewed relevant documents and made a one day visit to the 20 areas, focussing on hearing from end-users/beneficiaries, but also from partnership members and workers. Targeted work on how areas measure impact was conducted using a short questionnaire and follow-up interview.

Summary of findings

Research respondents reported a wide variety of types of impact. In terms of impacts for individuals, the most frequently reported were:

- Skills development and learning.
- Confidence development.
- Involvement in the community.
- Employment and enterprise.
- Social and inter-personal benefits.

The most frequently reported collective/community impacts were:

- New services/facilities available and being used.
- Organisational benefits.
- Improved community spirit.
- Making the area nicer and people's improved perceptions about the area.
- Having a voice.

A number of factors which had helped Big Local areas to achieve impact were noted, including (presented in no particular order): the Big Local partnership; skills, knowledge and experience available; working in partnership/a collaborative way; the availability of staff time; on-going engagement and communication with the local community; having a clear understanding, and consensus about what is needed; planning for activities, and gathering support for them; taking time to build a network and relationships with a wide variety of individuals and organisations.

Action points for consideration

The researchers propose a small number of action points for Local Trust.

Making the connection between delivery and impact

Areas have been asked to do a major piece of strategic planning. In their plans, they are articulating a vision, i.e. the impact they want their Big Local to achieve, as well as intentions for a variety of activities through which they intend to bring benefits to their area. It feels as if most areas are failing to retain this 'golden thread' between their activities and their vision, with the result that they are not asking enough about whether the activities are contributing towards achieving their vision as originally intended. In other words, there is a disconnect between the big strategic aim and the many small activities. In future, areas should be encouraged through all Big Local messaging and requirements such as the plan reviews to remember this linkage. Also, we wonder if areas are questioning whether they have chosen the RIGHT things to do in order to achieve their vision – an activity might bring about benefit, but is it the benefit they want? Or is it the best way to achieve their aims?

Raising the game – making impact a priority

It isn't that there is no impact, it's that areas are not thinking enough about it. It would be helpful to consider the routes that could be used to change this, including Local Trust guidance, Local Trust requirements for reporting, locally trusted organisations support, rep support, content at Spring Events and regional networking/training events etc. It is evident that messaging, and skills and knowledge development, have changed as the Big Local programme has moved along the pathway; now the time has come for a focus on impact.

Asking for more information about impact, supporting quality responses

This is relevant for areas and Local Trust. Areas can do more to ask more about impact, e.g. in the reporting back from commissioned services, in evaluating their own activities. As a community led programme, this will enhance the partnership's confidence in providing accountability back to their community about what has been achieved with the Big Local funding. Local Trust can place more emphasis on impact within the reporting it asks for from areas and reps, as well as its informal communications with areas without compromising the light touch approach. However, asking for information does not mean it will actually be received. There is a skills gap at partnership level, and probably amongst some of their service providers and many of their beneficiaries (e.g. community groups in receipt of a small grant), so the question arises about what Local Trust and others such as locally trusted organisations and reps can do to close the gap and enable quality recording and analysis of impact. The Big Local programme's existing mix of support, knowledge transfer and training mechanisms is the best place to start. Through these multiple routes, it will be possible to show that impact is highly important and relevant, and to equip areas with the tools, guidance and information that will help them to understand what impact is, why it is

important, and the tools and techniques available for assessing the impact their Big Local is making.

Conclusion

All of the areas included in this research described positive changes that have come about because of Big Local in their area.

The changes described so far are the 'right' ones, in terms of moving towards achieving Big Local's intended outcomes.

Some of the factors that Big Local areas explain are helping them to achieve impact are core elements of the Big Local model, i.e. the skills and knowledge within the partnership's membership, strong and on-going community engagement, taking a planned approach.

Each Big Local partnership is resident-led. The findings show considerable positive personal impacts for residents who have chosen to take an active role in their Big Local by becoming a partnership member, particularly those for whom this has been their first experience of such a role.

The Big Local areas present a clear sense of being on a ten year journey. This means that they are not always expecting impact yet, although they are keen to know that they are making progress. This research prompted the participating areas to carry out targeted reflection, all of whom completed their involvement with a recognition that they had achieved more than they had previously realised.

Area partnerships demonstrated in their behaviour, comments and documents that they have a very strong sense of commitment and accountability to their community. This is an impact in itself.