

Case study – Building on existing work and collaboration

The importance of existing and ongoing participation in Brookside Big Local

Each Big Local area is different and has varying levels of participation and community activity in the beginning. This case study explores the theme of where a Big Local partnership has *built on existing activity in the area*. In Brookside there were existing networks that have been used as a springboard for Big Local. Furthermore, it has continued this ethos of collaboration by working with and supporting other groups in the area.

Description of the activity

Activity outline

Working closely with others to engage the community was really important in Brookside, particularly as so much else was already going on. They utilised and built upon existing groups and networks in the formation and continuing work of Big Local. There had been active groups in the area for years, as noted in their Big Local Plan:

‘Local groups and organisations on Brookside...have for many years been actively engaging with local residents in order to understand the needs of the community, to take action to address these needs, and to organise events and activities to bring the community together.’¹

Two important groups predated Big Local and played an important part in its formation: Brookside Improvement Group and Brookside Events Group.

Brookside Improvement Group, recognised by Telford and Wrekin Council as the representative group of the residents of Brookside, had been active in the area for a number of years, pre-dating Big Local. It is involved in various council initiatives, including the Co-operative Council policy and the Street Champions scheme. The Big Local worker (who had been chair of the Big Local partnership prior to taking up the post) was involved with Brookside Improvement Group from its inception. It began six years ago when residents completed a survey that was part of a local authority initiative and were invited to attend a course called ‘Understanding your community’. It lasted ten weeks and nine other people were on the course. She felt like they had all taken an interest in the local community and they went on to form Brookside Improvement Group and this small group has proved to be effective.

‘It only takes a small group of people to get together and be passionate about the same sort of thing to set a spark really.’ (Worker)

Brookside Events Group was set up in 2013 by a group of local mothers as a result of what they perceived to be a lack of activities for young people locally. As well as running activities and groups, such as Cre-active, which provides arts and creative activities for local young people, they had been involved in organising Big Local events, such as the Brookside Big Local Summer Extravaganza in 2014.²

¹ Big Local Plan, p. 7.

² Image taken from:

<http://localtrust.org.uk/assets/downloads/documents/Spring%20Events/Brookside%20Big%20Local%20on%20community%20spirit.pdf>, p. 7



The Big Local partnership also worked with and supported other groups, for example a Be Active group. The group had originally been funded by Sport’s England to provide a variety of sports and activities, including zumba, trampoline, martial arts, fit steps and badminton. When the funding ended, the Big Local partnership supported the group. It emphasised how it was important for those active in the group to take ownership, and offered financial support during the transition. Those using the group were happy to start paying small fees to help make the group more sustainable. For the Big Local partnership it was a way of helping to preserve a group that had been of benefit to the estate, by providing health and exercise opportunities, and also as a way for the partnership to engage with people they had not been in contact with before.

Why they chose the activity

They used existing groups because people involved in Big Local were involved in them. These groups, in particular Brookside Improvement Group, were natural vessels to develop and promote Big Local. These organisations contained a group of active residents, who tapped into broader networks on the estate. It could also be argued that Brookside Improvement Group resembled in form a Big Local partnership, in the respect that it was a group of residents representing the local community.

How it fits in with Big Local in the area overall

There were two elements of Brookside’s Big Local vision in particular this fits with:

- ‘To continue our network of people involved to create a community run by its own for future development and interests.’
- ‘To work with our partnership to increase interest and development within the community.’³

Effectiveness

One of the strengths locally has been the level of **volunteering and voluntary action** over the last few years, including within the partnership. This forms the bedrock of activity:

³ Big Local plan, p. 1.

'We've been so used to doing for ourselves and banding together, trying to improve where we live...A lot of what we do doesn't cost money, it costs time. Lovely volunteers coming forward to actually do things to improve their estate.' (Worker)

The Big Local partnership have managed to **build on existing activities**. This includes existing groups and networks, but also **an ethos of collective action**, as the worker describes:

'It's almost like [if] something's going to happen, we all come together and make sure that it is a success and it actually happens, the magic starts type of thing. That's probably the best way to describe it. We get wind of something that's going on and we all get together.' (Worker)

There are open forums, which occur as a pre-meeting to main partnership meetings, which **offer opportunities for people to put forward ideas**.

There are **well-attended events and activities**, and Brookside Big Local also **works with a variety of agencies**, including the council.

Finally, **tangible achievements** like the extension of Be Active, provide a visible sign about what residents can achieve with Big Local's support.

Announcement on Facebook about the handover of



Be Active sessions

Learning (challenges and opportunities)

Challenges

The steering group found it difficult in the beginning to get a lot of people involved. This might have been in part due to doubts about really getting the Big Local money and apathy due to a belief that things would not change. Historically there was a lot of negativity that had become ingrained over the years. Yet it was felt that people were generally more optimistic now and could see things changing through Big Local and that they were being listened to.

There were also challenges initially around getting to grips with the administration in Big Local, the policy and procedures. This slowed things down in the beginning and there were a few criticisms about why things were taking so long:

'We have to go at a pace to keep everyone on board.' (Worker)

Another challenge was attempting to do all of the work with volunteers before finally engaging a worker in 2016. In retrospect the (now) worker found it difficult to believe that they were able to run it with only volunteers. Being volunteers, they felt they were not experts and found the experience to be a steep learning curve.

Learning for the Big Local Partnership

The interviewees highlighted several learning points. Firstly, **partnership development**: members of the partnership need to believe in the work of Big Local themselves before getting other people on board and inspiring them. It helped that members of the partnership had previous experience of engaging the community.

Secondly, **realism**: not everyone is going to agree with what you say or what Big Local does and the decisions arrived at, and the partnership needs to learn to accept that.

Finally, **reach**: the partnership's goal should be to reach as many people possible, through a variety of activities, to cover through engaging groups and networks every avenue in reaching the whole of the community.

Learning for other areas

Partnerships should be patient, thoughtful and listen whilst trying to engage the community and build on existing activity. It should also be remembered that the vast majority are volunteers and groups should be mindful of people other's commitments:

'If you're asking someone to engage on a voluntary basis make sure you look after them and make sure you support them well.' (Worker)