

Case study – Using activities to engage

Engaging people through events in SO18 Big Local

Events are common in Big Local, including those that directly promote the programme and broader *community events and celebrations*. Residents' route into participation in Big Local could start through attending events and subsequently getting more involved. SO18 Big Local actively use events to engage those who can get more involved in Big Local and the community.

Description of the activity

Activity outline

Events are central to the way SO18 Big Local engage the community. One of their aims/outcomes is to: *'Build [the] community through events open to all residents'*. The purpose of the events were two-fold. Firstly, to attract members of the community to the events themselves. Secondly, it is a way of engaging people to become more actively involved in Big Local.

'Events that are aimed at both having a positive thing to do and as a way to engage people.'
(Worker)

The community engagement elements to the Big Local events had many different layers, something that had changed over time. In the beginning these events were about engagement in Big Local during the 'Getting Involved' stage:

*'Our area has very few existing organisations, so getting out on the street and running engaging fun activities was essential to having conversations with local people about what was important to them. Out of this we have got a number of themes, which have been the backbone of our plan and what we're trying to achieve.'*¹



As time went on, the emphasis shifted, so that in addition to having good events in themselves, i.e. that were well attended and enjoyed by participants, the events were a way of drawing people in and getting them involved in Big Local:

'The partnership has been good at using some of the activities put on because they have identified a need, such as a job club and tea and tech [an internet café with volunteer assistance if it is required]...They have used those activities to meet an expressed need. But then they work very hard at encouraging and nurturing people that come to that into other potential roles in Big Local.' (Rep)

This was often referred to as discovering the 'treasure', something that was essentially seen to be a stepped approach. People rarely want to become more involved in Big Local straight away:

¹ SO18 Big Local practice Case Study

'Not scaring them off by saying "come and join our committee", because that doesn't work.'
(Worker)

It was also about nurturing the people who do get involved. The area summarised this approach as:

- A conscious effort to discover the 'treasure';
- The need to foster good relationships to learn people's past experience, and to discern their skills, interests and what sparks their energy;
- Continual attention to valuing the person as well as their role.

Events have included youth weeks, the Speak Up SO18 youth forum, Halloween events, Christmas events, a wellbeing event and spring community days. There have also been clean-up days at local green spaces and nature hunts for local families.²

Events could also be targeted at a particular demographic. For example, they organised a cream tea to celebrate the Queen's 90th birthday in the new hub, aimed specifically at older people.

'The whole objective of that cream tea was in particular for older people to come and have a conversation about whether we could together start some activities with that age group, of which there are a lot in that neighbourhood.' (Worker)

Why they chose the activity/how it fits in with Big Local in the area overall

This approach fitted in with the general community development ethos of the partnership. Events both filled a gap in an area low on such activities, and provided a way to consult people about Big Local and engage people more actively in Big Local.



Effectiveness

Events have been largely effective on both counts; people attending events and getting people in Big Local, although they need more people to become actively involved in the longer term.

The interviewees highlighted the following as being particularly effective in engaging the community in Big Local these events.

² <http://so18biglocal.org.uk/about/what-have-we-done-so-far/>

In general, it was felt that by engaging people **face-to-face** you learned more about what people really want. For example, they ran a survey for the profile which highlighted certain issues but it was when they ran **events and activities**, for example craft sessions, they got to learn more:

‘Overall it is their strategic approach to using all of the events and the activities that they put on to try and, well they call it uncovering the treasure. To spot who has the interest, capacity, need, would benefit from being more involved and to gradually try to involve them a little bit more in taking responsibility.’ (Rep)

The use of events is seen to be part of their **broader community development approach**. It would be easier or quicker in some ways for an individual to run things on their own but by forming a spring event planning group, for example the group got a great deal out of it, feeling a sense of ownership and achievement:

‘It’s using the events, it’s using anything as a tool to find the people who then might be part of the planning of it.’ (Worker)

In part this approach is about helping to identify and assist those who want to become more actively involved; connecting to the community minded people, finding what matters to them and helping them. The successful campaign against cutting bus services was a **tangible and visible achievement**.

‘It worked because we had a collective approach and Big Local made that happen.’ (Worker)

This campaign was not just important in itself, but also because it demonstrated that changes could happen if people acted collectively, something that could be facilitated through Big Local. It is often difficult for individuals to affect change on their own, but collectively they are able to change a great deal. However, there was also an element of choosing the right battles. For example, there were issues around regeneration in the area, with promises about the amount of social housing in the new development having been reneged upon, but the decision would be difficult to overturn because it was made by central government. Therefore they have to be strategic about where to devote their energies:

‘Trying to understand where we actually are going to make a difference, not just what the issues are’ (Worker)

Learning (challenges and opportunities)

Challenges

Communication could be a challenge. They found door knocking to be the most effective approach, but this could not be undertaken across the whole area because of its size. Whilst they can leaflet the whole area, people do not always read leaflets. They increasingly try to use social media, especially encouraging people to sign up to their Facebook page.

It was also important to note that the various parts of the Big Local area were different. For example, they had two similar events in different locations, with 70 attending in one but just a few children and two adults in the other. They therefore found that a standardised approach would not work.

One of the challenges was people having no involvement other than attendance at events:

'The trouble is people will come to things, they will be a user, sort of consumer of something like a spring community day, or a consumer of the grotto. They'll come, they'll bring their kids because it's Father Christmas, it's cheaper than town, it's good and fun and local and all the rest of it. But they don't see that as something they're involved in.' (Worker)

Some interviewees questioned what it meant to have people just attend events but not engage more deeply:

'So is that a success in itself? We've got a number of families who've really enjoyed the fact that they were part of quite a fun winter wonderland session round their streets...But we may not see them again till next Christmas. So what does that mean?' (Worker)

Learning for the Big Local Partnership

Those involved in SO18 Big Local identified the following learning.

They found **persistence** was important. There was no quick fix in engaging people, it takes time. The people they make contact with at events will not immediately become more active. In cases where people have got more involved, the more active involvement was gradual.

Recognising that **one step can lead to another** – initial engagement can lead to further engagement.

Having an **awareness of difficulties** – Initial engagement is not difficult, for example simply getting people to attend an event. But achieving repeated and deeper contact, the kind which leads to people being more actively involved, can be more challenging.

In terms of communication, **face-to-face contact is important**. Talking to people in person was found to be better than all other means of communication.

It is also about **development**: it is not just finding people with an existing skill set; it is also about wanting people to bloom.

Learning for other areas

There were three main tips.

- **Learn what a community development approach is about** – this approach does work, but it can be a slow process. As part of this it is important to understand what you are trying to achieve.
- **Reflect on events** – build in 'wash up' meetings soon after events to review how they went, what went well, and what could be improved.
- **Patience** – giving activities time to see whether they work:

'It's about being patient. Don't start something and finish it too quickly.' (Partnership member)