Invitation to tender

Research on Big Local relationships with public agencies

March 2021

Local Trust are commissioning research to understand relationships between Big Local areas and four types of public agencies: *local authorities*, *housing associations*, *schools* and *health agencies*. We are interested in understanding the nature, quality and outcomes of these relationships, and how they can best work together to achieve the lasting and sustainable change that Big Locals want to see. We want to understand what can enable and undermine these relationships, what an effective relationship looks like, and what is needed for other disadvantaged or 'left behind' communities to have effective relationships with these organisations now and in the future.

Local Trust is an independent charitable trust that runs the Big Local programme. Big Local is a 15-year Big Lottery funded initiative to support 150 communities in England. Each Big Local area has been awarded £1.15m to spend over 10-15 years. The work in areas is led by local volunteers, and areas set their own priorities. The Big Local programme is administered by Local Trust, which also provides training, networking, research, and support to areas.

Local Trust is committed to putting more power, resources and decision making into the hands of local communities to enable them to transform and improve their lives, and the places in which they live. We want to shift power and resources to communities, but know that any community wishing to make changes will need to work with others, particularly with those with power, resources and authority to make decisions that affect communities.

Big Local areas are hyper-local communities of place and every priority on which Big Local areas choose to work will require them to have a relationship with other organisations. The success of the Big Local programme depends on Big Locals having good relationships and working effectively with others. Further, over halfway through the delivery of the programme it is important for us to understand these relationships, their outcomes and how they can help and hinder Big Local partnerships (the group of at least eight people who guide the overall direction of Big Local in the area) from progressing their Big Local plans, delivering lasting and sustainable change, and from spending their Big Local funding before the programme ends in 2026.

Big Locals and public sector

Big Local partnerships have relationships with a range of stakeholders across civil society, private and public sectors, and previous research and projects have sought to explore relationships with developers, local councils, health agencies and public services to help us understand the connections Big Local areas are making, how they are working with other power holders others to deliver their plans, and what we could do to better support them develop these relationships. We know that Big Local partnerships will engage with the public sector in some capacity as part of delivering their Big Local plans, and a recent scoping paper brought together our learning specifically about relationships with the public sector (broadly defined to include private or civil society organisations delivering public services, i.e. housing associations). We learned that partnerships have relationships with a range of organisations across the public sector and feel these relationships are good. Relationships are mostly with local authorities (including councillors and officers), housing associations, schools, universities and colleges, and health agencies.

However, we know little about the purpose behind the relationships with these different public agencies, how they started, their outcomes, what enables and undermines them, or how effective they are. This research will help us to fill this gap, focusing on relationships with local authorities, housing associations, schools and health agencies. A copy of the scoping paper is below, and it is recommended that applicants review this and reflect it in their response wherever possible. The research we are looking to commission will build on research already conducted about these agencies and what we already know.

We are seeking an experienced researcher, organisation or consortium with experience of delivering high quality research with communities, and of researching community relationships with the public sector. Given the breadth of the expertise required, we encourage multiple researchers/ organisations partnering for this work. It is important that the successful provider works sensitively and empathetically with Big Local areas, and that the Big Local partnerships who participate in the research benefit from it. Finally, it is also important for the provider to understand the principles of the Big Local programme, and to be supportive of Local Trust's values, ethos and approach to creating resident-led change. More information on Local Trust, Big Local and the support we offer Big Local communities can be accessed here: www.localtrust.org.uk.

Research questions

The research questions that we are seeking to answer are below, along with the aspects that we are particularly interested in.

1. To what extent are Big Local areas developing relationships with public agencies?

We are interested in *the purpose of these relationships, how they developed,* and *who relationships are with (who is holding them)*. Big Local is a resident-led programme, so we are also interested in *where power and control reside* within these relationships. Although Big Local areas are hyper-local, we want to understand *the different levels these relationships are operating*, recognising that public agencies will cover a larger geographical boundary and remit.

2. What are the outcomes of these relationships?

We would like to know the outcomes (desired and undesired) *for the Big Local partnerships, Big Local areas* and *public agencies*. Further aspects we would like to see are where *outcomes go beyond the hyperlocal* Big Local area. Where possible, we would like the research to draw out how

the relationship with Big Local, or the principles underpinning the Big Local model, have or could positively *influence the culture or practice of public agencies.*

3. To what extent are these relationships effective?

We are interested in *what an effective relationship between Big Local areas and public agencies looks like in practice.* The research will need to unpack *what enables and supports effective relationship*s to form and *what blocks and undermines* these from developing. This would also need to consider the expected (and experienced) *changes as a result of COVID-19 and a post-COVID-19 context.*

4. How can communities and public agencies best work together now and in the future?

Drawing on the findings from above questions, this question will bring together key findings and approaches, along with recommendations for Local Trust, Big Local areas and public agencies. We would like to draw out learning that could be used by, and be relevant to, other disadvantaged communities and to policy makers.

The final research report should be accessibly written, and include an executive summary, collating the main findings and practical recommendations.

We are looking for a range of outputs for this research that will:

- Provide guidance to Big Local areas
- Be of use to the four types of public agencies about working with communities
- Explain to decision-makers and influencers how relationships between public agencies and communities work and what they can achieve

Research methods and approach

We are open to different methods and approaches, but it is important that those participating benefit from the process and the outputs produced.

We expect the research to review existing Local Trust research and information, including both qualitative and quantitative data collected by the Local Trust research team.

We envisage research to be conducted with at least three Big Local study areas in each group (a minimum of 12 Big Local study areas for the research in total).

Primary research could also include specific members of Local Trust staff, partners and those supporting Big Local partnerships to deliver their Big Local plans (e.g. Big Local Reps, Big Local workers, and representatives from Locally Trusted Organisations (LTOs).

It is important to note that Big Local is a resident-led programme, and most partnership members are volunteers.

Timeline and budget

This research will take place between 24 May 2021 and 31 October 2021, with draft outputs expected before 30 September 2021.

The budget for the research is up to £60,000, inclusive of VAT and all expenses.

Budgets should make provision for at least two rounds of comments on draft outputs and submission of final, clean drafts. Local Trust will undertake any design and production work for written outputs.

Commissioning process

Please include the following information within your proposal, clearly setting out the following using the numbering below:

1. An overview of you and/or your organisation: charity, company or other reference or registration number; summary annual income and expenditure for the 2019/20 financial year; projected income for 2020/21; membership of trade bodies, kite marks or awards relevant to this contract.

2. Your understanding of what is needed.

3. Your experience of undertaking research with communities.

4. A detailed description of how you would approach the work and deliver the research and how you would plan to undertake primary research within the context of social distancing or COVID restrictions. This should include a timeline indicating when you would plan to deliver different activities, key milestones and deliverables against each of these, along with outputs and what Local Trust, Big Local partnerships and public agencies would benefit from their involvement.

5. A detailed budget including all costs, expenses and VAT, specifying all day rates, the number of days proposed and cost of particular activities.

6. Details of the staffing you propose for the work. A description of the team's skills which outlines how you meet the skills requirements, including CVs (as appendices).

7. A description of your knowledge and experience of working with communities and volunteers.

8. A description of your expertise and understanding of public services, specifying which sectors.

9. Details of how you will project manage and quality assure your work.

10. The contact details of two previous clients with direct knowledge or experience of your work relevant to this contract. Please specify how the referees know your work and if they can be contacted by us straightaway.

11. A statement on how you would ensure compliance with GDPR regulations.

12. Any other relevant information that will assist us in our decision.

13. Your contact details, including email address and phone number.

Proposals should not exceed 10 pages and fonts should be a minimum of size 11. CVs can be appended and do not count towards the page limit but should not be any longer than two pages each.

Submitting a proposal

Please send your proposal as a PDF document (including CVs) to: research@localtrust.org.uk.

Please include ITT: BIG LOCALS AND PUBLIC AGENCIES RESEARCH as the subject line.

Proposals to be submitted by: Monday 26 April 2021, 12.00pm (UK time).

Following this process, we intend to shortlist a small number of potential providers to invite for interview (over Zoom) on 12 or 13 May 2021.

Any questions relating to this ITT should be emailed to research@localtrust.org.uk with the subject line QUERY: BIG LOCALS AND PUBLIC AGENCIES RESEARCH.

Assessing your proposal

Contracts will be awarded based on the provider whose offer is assessed to be the most advantageous in terms of cost, methodology, understanding of the brief and relevant experience.

Proposals will be assessed using the following criteria:

- Skills, resources and experience to carry out all elements of the work

- Evidence of understanding in relation to:

    - volunteers, communities and place-based community action

    - public sector and organisations (civil society and private sector) delivering public services

- Understanding of who the work is aimed at and the most effective approaches to format, tone, accessibility

- Evidence of understanding of, and adherence to, Big Local, our values, ethos and approach to creating resident-led change.

- Value for money (we are not bound to accept the cheapest proposal).

More information on Local Trust and Big Local can be accessed here: www.localtrust.org.uk

Big Local partnerships and the public sector: scoping paper

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to bring together what we know about Big Local partnerships working with the public sector, where there are gaps in our data and knowledge and to help us to identify what we might want to explore further.

This is a topic of interest for several reasons. Firstly, any community wishing to make changes will need to work with public bodies, and almost every priority on which Big Local areas choose to work will require working with the public sector in some capacity. In many ways, the success of the programme depends on Big Locals and public bodies working together effectively.
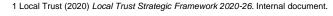
Our new strategy includes goals relating to the successful delivery of the programme and mainstreaming of the Big Local approach and principles in the civil, private and public sector. It also includes targets in relation to supporting areas link with people, places and institutions, and shifting power and resources to communities[1]. This topic helps us to test our hypothesis about the programme in relation to the resident-led nature of Big Local, and what this looks like when working with others. Finally, halfway through the programme it is important for us to better understand Big Local relationships with partners, including the public sector, and how these can help and hinder partnerships from spending out before the end of the programme and delivering lasting change.

Ultimately, the question this paper seeks to answer is: **"What do we know about Big Local partnerships working with the public sector"?** As a scoping paper, the remit is purposefully broad but will help us to identify topics, research questions and potential areas of interest on which to focus afterwards. It has also adopted a broad conception of the "public sector" that is open to private or third sectors delivering public services (i.e. housing associations). It is also not limited to Big Local partnerships in "working" or "delivery" relationships but includes other connections and engagements where we have data.

The paper is based predominantly on secondary data, but also includes primary data collected through a Big Local rep report and conversations with staff and partners.

Background

Before exploring how Big Local partnerships are working with the public sector, it is worth highlighting the power imbalance that exists between the public sector and communities, as this often serves as the backdrop against which they relate to and interact with one another. Several

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1 Local Trust (2020) *Local Trust Strategic Framework 2020-26*. Internal document.

government programmes and initiatives have been introduced over the years with the intention of "empowering" or transferring more of this power from the state to communities. Initiatives in the 1990s, the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, Big Society and the Localism Act all spoke of shifting power to communities, and it has been argued that some gains have been made in this respect. There are positive examples of communities producing or running services, controlling assets and creating new spaces for their engagement[2]. However, there are also criticism of their limits in transferring power. Issues relating to "asset dumping", communities not knowing the "rules of the game", public sector hierarchy and aversion to risk, and the difficulty of challenging structural inequalities, have all been highlighted as some of the barriers experienced[3].

What is currently said about communities and the public sector?

There have been several debates recently about the public sector and its relationship with communities. To provide context, below is an overview of some common themes and topics discussed.

- **Reform the public sector**: The public sector needs to reform and give more power and resources to communities. This is suggested as a pragmatic response to increased demand for public services and decreased public sector resources[4]. The sector is seen as holding too much power and control. Devolving more to communities would enable them to effectively address local problems, build on their assets and strengths, and work towards a more preventative approach to social issues[5].

- **Communities controlling public services**: Communities should have more decision-making control and power over local resources and have more control over the planning, design and delivery of local public services. The more they are involved in public service, the better outcomes for individuals and the communities themselves[6].

- **Changing the culture of the public sector**: An important part of public sector reform is the need for the sector to change its culture and the way it works with communities. This would see it move from a top-down, "command and control" structure, to one that facilitates others to do. Local authorities are encouraged to change their approach to working with communities and adopt a "changemaking" mindset, focusing more on working with them creatively and innovatively to prevent problems before they emerge[7]. Programmes, such as Nesta's "Upstream Collaborative", work with local authorities on new, creative ways of working with communities.

- **COVID-19:** COVID-19 has highlighted weaknesses within the public sector, whilst also highlighting strengths within communities. Some argue that the pandemic provides an opportunity to positively change the relationship between the two. In addition, as public sector budgets and capacity are strained and new or changing needs emerge, the sector will have to find a way to share decision making with communities and work more cooperatively[8]. We have seen how some communities were able to respond quickly to the pandemic and fill gaps left by

2. Taylor, M (2011). *Public Policy in the* Community, 2nd ed. London

3 Ibid.,

4 Lent, A et al (2019) NLGN. *The Community Paradigm: Why public services need radical change and how it can be achieved*

5 Dr Simon Kaye (2020). New Local/ *Think big, act small: Elinor Ostrom's Radical Vision for Community Power*

6 Lent, A et al (2019)

7 Lent, A et al (2017) NLGN. *A Changemaking vision for local government: An NLGN think piece.*

8 Goff, C et al (2020). *Neighbourhood working beyond the pandemic: how COVID-19 has shone a spotlight on the power of local approaches.*

the public sector; and this is seen as evidence of the strength of communities and what they can offer. Research by New Local, argues that the pandemic highlighted weaknesses in our systems and infrastructure, including the public sector, which in turn all need to be "redesigned" and "redeveloped" to be resilient for the future[9].

What can we learn from other place- based empowerment programmes?

Before exploring what we already know about Big Local areas and the public sector, it is helpful to see what we can learn from the experience of other place- based empowerment programmes. New Deal for Communities (NDC)[10], Communities First (CF)[11] and Invest Local (IL)[12] were programmes delivered in England and Wales. Although not an exhaustive list, they nonetheless offer some relevant learning about the experiences of communities and the public sector as part of their involvement in the programmes.

Positive difference

The programmes highlighted some positive impacts in relation to improved or closer relationships. NDC noted improved relationships with local delivery agencies and local authorities specifically. It also spoke of a closer relationship with senior people in agencies involved in the programme, and an improved perception of the area on behalf of said agencies[13]. Invest Local highlighted the benefit of the councillors, who were "opening doors" for the communities involved[14].

Barriers and blocks

Some of barriers and blocks encountered in these programmes are also worth keeping in mind. NDC mentioned agency re-organisations and staff turnover at local authorities as challenges in these relationships [15]. It also takes time to build trusting relationships between the communities and the public sector. In some communities, there was a lack of trust in the programme due to the perception that previous community development programmes had failed communities[16]. Further barriers included the risk averse nature of public sector bodies, their difficulties working to national (not local) targets, and challenges working at a neighbourhood level, when their remit is regional or sub regional[17]. The CF programme also found that some communities were delivering services that could or should have been provided by their local public bodies[18].

Type of public body

The programmes potentially offer an indication of the relationships most likely to develop between communities and the public sector. NDC found that the communities involved usually developed relationships with their local authority (because this was most likely to be the planning authority), with public bodies that had a "natural affinity" to the neighbourhood, or with those whose remit included public services improvement[19].

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9 NLGN (2020). T*owards resilience: Redesigning our systems for a better future.*

10 New Deal for Communities was a 10-year government funded programme, launched in 1998, supporting 39 deprived neighbourhoods in England.

11 Communities First is a Community focussed programme supporting the Welsh Government's Tackling Poverty agenda. It was launched in 2001

12 Invest Local is a programme, funded by Big Lottery Fund, supporting 13 communities across Wales. It is managed by Building Communities Trust.

13 Batty, E. et al (2010) DCLG. *The New Deal for Communities: A final assessment*

14 Byner, C et al. (2017) *Insights from 'Your Community'- a place-based approach to public service reform*

15 Batty, E et al

16 Building Communities Trust (2020): *Invest Local: The first three years*

17 Batty, E el al (2010)

18 National Assembly for Wales. (2017) *Communities First: Lessons Learnt*

19 ibid

Big Local model and how it differs

There are differences between the Big Local programme and these place-based programmes that are worth mentioning. Big Local is not government funded and Local Trust is an independent trust, which could mean there is a higher acceptance of risk when working with communities[20]. It is also a very long-term programme, giving communities and the public sector the time needed to slowly build relationships (if they decide to do so). It could be argued that unlike previous programmes, Big Local is structured to give communities real power and control [21]. It is also resident-led, and although there are complexities about what this means in practice [22], the focus is on residents making decisions and deciding how to spend their funding, not external partners. There are no annual spend requirements, targets or externally imposed goals; priorities and activities are decided locally, and at least 51 per cent of Big Local partnerships must be residents [23]. Finally, Big Local areas have decision making control over £1.1m- a financial resource that gives them a degree of power and influence, and something else to bring to the table.

What can Big Local partnerships gain from these relationships?

Working with public bodies offers several benefits and opportunities for Big Local areas. Working with the public sector will help them deliver their Big Local plans and achieve the outcomes they have identified for their areas. It is difficult to see how they would be able to do so without working with some public bodies along the way. There are also other reasons why these relationships can be good for Big Local partnerships, such as:

- They can offer opportunities to pool Big Local resources and make their funding go further
- Working with the public sector can raise the profile and reach of Big Local, both within and beyond the area
- Public bodies can act as deliverers of Big Local plans, freeing up the partnerships' capacity
- Public bodies can also bring knowledge, ideas, skills and understanding that can be valuable to partnerships
- Public bodies can provide insight into navigating public sector processes, thinking and priorities, and introduce partnerships to new networks, contacts and relationships.
- Being connected to external partners (whether public, private or third sector) can help partnerships achieve their legacy and sustain projects and activities long after the end of the programme.

Public bodies can also benefit from relationships with Big Local partnerships. For example, Big Local partnerships can: provide access to community groups and parts of the community they might not have accessed before, enable the public sector to deliver on their own plans and strategies, and act as a link between the community and public bodies[24]. Partnerships can also provide a voice for the community, help shape, improve and tailor public services, and promote existing services locally. The partnership itself can act a space where residents and agencies can come together to talk, address issues and come up with solutions[25]. These are not exhaustive lists but give a sense of the value and potential opportunities in these relationships for both.

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20 Local Trust (2020) *Power in our hands: An inquiry into place-based funding in the Big Local programme*

21 Local Trust (date unknown). *Powerful communities: creating new decision-making spaces.* Internal literature review

22 Local Trust (2020) *Power in our hands: An inquiry into resident-led decision making in the Big Local programme*

23 Ibid

24 McCabe, A et al. (2019) *Big Local: Reflections from 'the Outside In' (Paper Three)*

25 Baker, L et al (2016). IVAR. *People, places and health agencies: Lessons from Big Local residents.*

What do we know about Big Local partnerships and the public sector?

Who are their relationships with?

As part of the delivering Big Local, partnerships are encouraged to work with external partners, including public agencies and councils[26]. In responses to the most recent Big Local rep report, we learned that 132 Big Local partnerships are working with public agencies to deliver their plans [27]. And in our most recent survey of Big Local partnership members, 82 per cent of respondents said they worked with external partners to deliver activities[28].

Based on responses to the same rep report, we can see partnerships are working with a range of public agencies too[29]. This data is partial and coded from open responses (although asked who partnerships were working with and how, not all reps provided this detail). However, we can say that partnerships are connecting with:

- local authorities and councils at different levels (county, district, borough, city and parish, community and town)
- councillors and council officers, specifically
- housing associations
- schools, universities and colleges
- health agencies

It seems less common for them to connect with local police, although a number of them do so.

When we compare this to responses to the recent partnership members survey, we see that partnerships have relationships with local councillors, schools, councils, police and health providers[30]. And from responses to an earlier rep report, we know that nearly half of Big Local partnership (72) had a "working relationship" with their local housing association a year ago[31].

What is the nature of these relationships?

We know that most Big Locals are working with the public sector, but what do we know about how they're connecting with one another? Again, data here suggest partnerships have relationships with the public sector in a number of capacities. As before, categories have been developed from rep responses to an open question, so are partial:

- funding the public sector to deliver projects, activities or services
- funded by the public sector to deliver projects, activities or services
- developing or acquiring assets from the public sector
- developing or delivering projects, activities or services in partnership/collaboration
- working on large development/infrastructure projects with the public sector
- giving and receiving informal advice and support
- participating on networks and fora with public bodies
- promoting and sharing information about respective projects, activities and services
- consulting and gathering community feedback on public sector projects, activities or services

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26 Local Trust guidance. *Big Local partnerships*

27 Local Trust. Big Local rep quarterly report, 2020-21, Quarter 2. Internal data.

28 Local Trust. (2020) *National Survey of Big Local partnership members 2020*. Internal data.

29 Local Trust. Big Local rep quarterly report, 2020-21. Quarter 2

30 Local Trust. (2020) *National Survey of Big Local partnership members 2020*

31 Local Trust. Big Local rep quarterly report, 2019-20. Quarter 2. Internal data

As well as working with the public sector on locally based activity, some partnerships are also working with them on a strategic level and in relation to large scale developments or projects that go beyond the Big Local boundary.

A common space for Big Local partnerships and the public sector to interact is through acquiring, renting and developing assets[32]. In fact, a survey of Big Local reps reveals that 72 Big Local areas have purchased or funded the creation of a "significant physical asset" [33]. In most cases, this would entail requesting council permission or support. Although there are several examples where this has been successful, this type of work can take time, be frustrating for Big local partnerships and on some occasions lead to some projects being abandoned. Responses to open questions to the 2018 survey of Big Local partnership members reveal this frustration, with council red tape/bureaucracy, and challenges working with the council in relation to asset transfers, mentioned as one of their main challenges[34].

We also know that Big local partnerships and the public sector are connected through the partnership space itself. Data from the 2018 partnership review tells us that members of the partnership include a variety of people from the public sector. These include councillors/officers, school reps/head teachers, housing associations and the police, but this is likely to include others depending on how they describe themselves (i.e. "partner rep" and "partner organisation"). In response to a question in the latest Big Local rep report, we learned that 78 Big Local partnerships have a representative from a public agency on the partnership[35], however data on which agencies exactly is incomplete.

Big Local guidance for partnerships states that members are there in their own right, as opposed to representing the views of another person or organisation[36]. But partnerships can create their own rules, and many have representatives on the partnership in different capacities. A review of rep responses reveals that public agency representatives are a combination of partnership members, those attending meetings but without being a partnership member, and members of sub, theme or working groups, but not on the partnership itself. The challenges in relation to stakeholders on the partnership have been touched on in research as part of the in Our Bigger Story (OBS) evaluation and will also be explored as part of upcoming research on power dynamics on partnerships. More data in relation to this would be helpful, including the value these connections bring to the Big Local partnership and to the agency itself.

In addition to connecting with public sector bodies within the Big Local partnership (or sub, theme and working groups), programme team data shows that 24 Big Local areas have a public body as their Locally Trusted Organisation (LTO)[37]. The most common are local authorities and councils, followed by housing associations and schools/academies. Having a public body as an LTO can be an asset for Big Local partnerships. It can introduce them to new contacts and networks, enable them to access resources and knowledge, and mean they potentially have a local power holder as a champion for their work. It would be interesting to explore the difference this can make, and the ways in which it can enhance, but also create a challenge, for those Big Local partnerships. A degree of power and influence comes with the role of LTO; if they also have a power due to their

32 Gregory, D. (2018). *Skittled Out? The collapse and revival of England's social infrastructure* and Boyle, D (2019) *Counterweight: Levelling the scales of local power*

33 Local Trust. Big Local rep quarterly report, 2020-21, Quarter 2. Internal data.

34 Local Trust. (2018) *National Survey of Big Local partnership members 2018*. Internal data.

35 Local Trust. Big Local rep quarterly report, 2020-21, Quarter 2. Internal data.

36 Local Trust guidance. *Big Local partnerships*

37 Local Trust. Data from the programme's team. Internal.

role in the local community (for example as a landlord or commissioner of services), can this make it harder for Big Local partnership to challenge or assert their authority?

How do partnership members feel about the quality of these relationships?

Although we have little robust and systematic data on the nature and depth of these connections, we do have data and information about how some areas experience and perceive the quality of these relationships. The recent survey of Big Local partnership members shows that 86 per cent of respondents feel that they have good working relationships with external partners[38]. The majority also feel that they have "good" or "excellent" relationships with local councillors, councils, local schools and the local police[39]. However, less than half of respondents felt they had "good" or "excellent" relationships with their local health providers. Perhaps not surprising, their relationships are local, with 53 per cent saying that they had a "poor" or "no relationship" with national government departments. 39 per cent of respondents felt they had a "good" or "excellent" relationship with their local MP, but 21 per cent that they had "no relationship". Our policy handbook helping partnerships to engage with their local MPs, could support those wanting to establish a new or improve an existing relationship.

Most respondents to the survey feel their relationships with councillors and councils are "good" or "excellent" (72 per cent think the partnership has a good relationship with their local councillors, and 65 per cent with their local council)[40]. Previous research with Big Local areas highlights that relationships with councils can vary across areas. Some collaborate, others have a "sporadic connection" and some "keep councillors at arm's length" [41]. The same research highlights principles to help communities (i.e. Big Local partnerships) have successful relationships with councils. Suggestions include understanding what each are trying to achieve, building trust, having an ongoing dialogue and communication and being "flexible and adaptable" [42].

Responses to our previous partnership members survey also give us a sense of how members feel about these relationships. Positively, councils were mentioned in relation to achievements, with improved relationships with the council and working with the council on projects things of note. Delivering, planning and having conversations with the public sector (including councils) about projects were also mentioned as particular achievements.

COVID-19

Based on data collected through the first five months of the national lockdown, we learned that the majority of Big Local areas were able to respond to the pandemic and took on different roles in their community when doing so[43]. Data also shows that most Big Local partnerships worked with the public sector as part of this response. According to reps, 103 Big Local areas were networking and coordinating with authorities. For some, this included "collaborative" working with local councils, schools, and NHS agencies (GPs, clinics etc.,) [44].

Most Big Local partnerships have relationships with the public sector and many drew on these existing relationships. A smaller number of partnerships made new relationships with the public

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38 Local Trust. (2020) *National Survey of Big Local partnership members 2020*. Internal data.

39 Local Trust.(2020) *National Survey of Big Local partnership members 2020*. Internal data.

40 Ibid

41 Tjoa, P (2018). NLGN. *Rebalancing the power: Five principles for a successful relationship between councils and communities*.

42 Ibid

43 Local Trust (2020) *The role of Big Local partnerships during lockdown*

44 Local Trust. Big Local rep quarterly report, 2020-21, Quarter 1. Internal data.

sector during time and were collaborating with them [45]. However, our research on community responses suggests that areas with more established community-led infrastructure (which includes relationships with local agencies) appeared to have a more effective community response than those where this was not as established [46]. Again, based on responses from reps, 89 areas were working through an existing relationship with their local council, 17 with existing relationships with NHS "bodies" and 58 with existing relationships with schools [47].

There are many positive examples of Big Local partnerships working with the public sector in their response to the pandemic. Big Local partnerships were coordinating volunteers for the council response, working as distribution hubs for council support, setting up and co-funding new projects with the council to support residents, and were part of wider networks with the public and voluntary sector to coordinate response activity. A review of our submissions to the ministry for housing, communities and local government (MHCLG) show that some Big Locals felt recognised, trusted and appreciated by the council and that they had demonstrated their value and what they could achieve. In contrast, some had a challenging time during the response. A lack of council activity or engagement, feeling they were filling gaps in council support (particularly in relation to food provision and support for schools), being excluded from wider conversations about the response, and poor communication regarding council owned hubs have all been flagged as issues. In conversations as part of the COVID-19 sessions, areas also spoke of not being treated as equal partners, feeling left to respond on their own, and a lack of the council's capacity to respond. Our research on responses to COVID-19 argues the pandemic has not changed relationships but strengthened good relationships that already existed and exacerbated tensions already present in relationships[48].

What challenges can Big Local partnerships experience in these relationships?

Power dynamics

A common challenge experienced in relationships with the public sector relates to the issue of power. Partnership members with multiple "hats" or roles, such as a resident who is also a councillor, can influence decision making on the partnership, whether or not they vote[49]. Having resident councillors on the partnership can make a positive difference. They can be the voice of the community within the council, share information back and forth, be a champion for Big Local, link their work to council priorities, and bring specific knowledge to the work of the partnership. However, when residents are also local decision makers within the community it can also complicate the practice, reality and meaning of "resident-led" decision making, lead to potential conflicts of interest and encourage other resident members to defer to them because of their role [50]. Some partnerships have created rules prohibiting councillors from joining the partnership, although we do not have systematic data on how many or the impact this has had.

Where there is an imbalance, it can ultimately disempower the partnership and shift control and decision making away from resident members. But this is not necessarily a feeling that is shared by partnership members themselves. In the latest partnership members survey, when asked if all

45 Ibid

46 McCabe, A et al (2020). *Stronger than anyone thought: Communities responding to COVID-19*

47 Local Trust. Big Local rep quarterly report, 2020-21, Quarter 1. Internal data.

48 McCabe, A et al (2020)

49 McCabe, A et al (2018) *Big Local: Reflections on 'resident led' change (Paper one)*

50 Ibid

members took part in decision making, most respondents agreed. Most respondents also disagreed that external partners had too much influence over their decision making [51]. Our research on power on partnerships will explore this further.

Previous research has also argued that some partnership can lack an understanding of local power holders along with the skills needed to navigate these bodies to their benefit [52]. It is suggested that a greater understanding of who holds power within, and beyond, the Big Local area would be beneficial. But this is not always the case. There is evidence that some partnerships are attuned to local power structures and are lobbying, challenging and influencing them for the benefit of the community. When asked about their knowledge of local stakeholders, partnership members also felt that they were knowledgeable and knew who to work with- 80 per cent of respondents thought their partnership had a good understanding of who to work with to get things done. When it comes to the partnership influencing local decision making, the majority of respondents also felt that they could do this, but at 64 per cent it suggests that this is not as strong as it could be [53].

Public sector bureaucracy, culture and resources

The public sector can have a bureaucracy and culture that can make it difficult for Big Local partnerships. Firstly, in some Big Local areas, the public sector landscape itself can be complex, with different bodies, remits and structures to navigate. Within this, public bodies can have their own bureaucracy and culture that areas are expected to understand and work with. Councils have different teams for different areas, and there can be a lack of communication and coordination between them which can cause delays. They can also take time giving permission for projects, particularly those involving planning permission for physical assets.

There can also be a lack of flexibility within the public sector, with some partnerships struggling to work with schools that have their own processes, systems and ways of working (which can be a particular challenge if they are an LTO for the partnership). In other examples, partnerships have faced delays in commissioning services with a public body because of the need to go through established channels or processes, or because of the amount of paperwork involved between the service provider they want to work with and their LTO [54]. However, having an "ally" within the public body can help areas navigate complex systems, structures and ways of working, but not all areas will have access to these [55].

In terms of culture and ways of working, councillors can sometimes prefer to work with those who understand how councils work or who know the "rules of the game". This can make it hard for partnership members who do not and place a premium on those who do (i.e. partnership members or workers, for example) [56]. Organisational changes and staff turnover can also make it hard to maintain relationships with contacts in the public sector, something that can be particularly difficult considering the time it can take to build them. Positively, Big Local partnerships have the time to do this.

Public bodies who do not understand the principles of Big Local can also be a challenge. This has been suggested particularly in relation to councils (but could apply to any public body)[57]. Are

51 Local Trust. (2020) *National Survey of Big Local partnership members 2020.* Internal data.

52 McCabe, A et al (2017) *Big Local: Beyond the Early Years. Our Bigger Story: The Longitudinal Multi Medica Evaluation of Big Local, 2015-2016*

53 Local Trust (2020). *National Survey of Big Local partnership members 2020.* Internal data.

54 Baker, L et al

55 Ibid

56 McCabe, A et al (2019) *Big Local: Reflections from 'the Outside In' (Paper Three)*

57 Ibid

councils more likely to understand Big Local, and community development work more generally, than schools, for example? Where this understanding is lacking, the partnership can face an ongoing battle to explain or demonstrate it. Previous research highlighted the need to regularly reiterate the key messages about the Big Local programme, such as the ethos, timeframe and funding, as a reminder and as a way to ensure learning isn't lost when partnership members or contacts move on [58].

Reductions in public sector budgets and capacity can strain relationships[59]. In open responses to the 2018 partnership members survey, some respondents noted challenges in relation to feeling that they were plugging gaps in council budgets or that the council only wanted them for the funding they could provide. Similarly, in previous research exploring relationships with health agencies (including local authorities), cuts, mergers and outsourcing were all flagged as challenges faced by partnerships[60]. In turn, these changes make it harder for partnerships to know which services local authorities have a statutory duty to provide, and therefore which ones the partnership can, and cannot, use their Big Local funding for [61]. It is likely that the current economic context and recession will increase this pressure, and partnership might find it difficult to resist stepping into the gaps that are left. We have already seen the work that partnerships have been doing in relation to food poverty - an area that many partnerships were actively addressing in their response work.

Being hyperlocal and strategic

The hyperlocal nature of Big Local areas has been highlighted as a barrier to connecting and working with some public bodies. For example, navigating multiple layers of local government or trying to engage with a council with decision making powers that is far away, can make it difficult for them to build relationships and to influence [62]. Further challenges relate to Big Locals focusing "inward" and on the local, to the extent that they miss out on opportunities to connect their work and desired outcomes to wider agendas and strategies. This can prevent them from having conversations with local power holders and from brokering relationships at a more strategic level [63]. Finding common ground and articulating their shared outcomes can help Big Locals and public bodies to bridge these barriers and some have been able to do so [64]. There are examples of Big Local partnerships working with or establishing relationships at a strategic level through neighbourhood plans and forums, developing regeneration plans and influencing council strategies, for example. Further research could help us to understand how some have been able to do this, how they work in practice, and how the Big Local partnership can maintain its voice, and focus on their desired outcomes, when engaging at this level. Our policy and advocacy panel can be seen as evidence that areas are increasingly interested in engaging at a strategic level and in influencing the national policies impacting their areas.

The nature of the relationships with public bodies can also pose a challenge. Individual relationships and "key allies" within public bodies can be significant in influencing the partnership's ability to engage and influence, however it can also disadvantage areas who do not have these relationships or people to work with [65]. It has also been argued that these relationships are likely to be based on

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58 Baker, L et al

59 Ibid

60 Ibid

61 Ibid

62 McCabe, A et al. (2020). *Big Local as Change Agent*

63 McCabe, A et al (2019) *Big Local: Reflections from 'the Outside In' (Paper Three)*

64 Baker, L et al

65 Ibid

more personal connections, as opposed to being embedded within the structures of the public body or Big Local itself, making them vulnerable as people (on either side) leave and move on [66]. Finally, in relation to councils particularly, relationships here can be with officers and at an operational level, as opposed to those with a strategic oversight and influence.

Potential topics of interest and research questions

As a scoping paper, the focus has been intentionally broad to offer an overview of what we know and what we don't. Existing data tells us quite a bit about Big Local partnerships and the public sector. We know how many Big Local partnerships have relationships with public sector bodies, have a sense of which public bodies they work with and how, and have data about how partnership members feel about the quality of these relationships. Data reveals that over half of Big Local areas have a representative from a public agency on the partnership and commissioned research to explore power on partnerships will enhance our understanding of this. But what else might we want to learn? Potential areas to explore are offered below.

To what extent are Big Local areas developing relationships with local public sector bodies?

- What is the nature of these relationships? What is the purpose and what are the outcomes?
- How do Big Local partnerships maintain their control and power in different relationships?

How can communities and public bodies work better together?

- Potential guidance for Big Local areas and Creative Civic Change (CCC) areas on how to work effectively with public bodies.

How have some Big Local areas been able to engage with the public sector on a strategic level, beyond the hyperlocal?

- What has enabled them to do this? What are the challenges and risks experienced? What are the outcomes of these engagements?

Public sector representatives on Big Local partnerships, theme, sub and working groups.

- What are the opportunities and challenges with these connections?

What impact is COVID-19 having on Big Local areas' relationships with the public sector?

- What support do Big Local partnerships need to develop or strengthen these relationships?

What data might we need?

At present, we do not have systematic data across areas on who they are working with, the nature of their relationships or what these relationships have led to (i.e. outputs and outcomes). Collecting this, mostly likely from Big Local reps, could give us a better sense of where we are in terms of the current spread, nature and the difference these relationships have made to Big Local areas. It would also help us to identify further topics to explore through research or where to focus future support for areas in the future.

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66 McCabe, A et al. (2020). *Big Local as Change Agent*