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Review of the support offer – Final Report

A version of this paper was published internally by Local Trust in 2018. This version has been lightly edited to make it accessible for a general audience, with core terms and concepts explained wherever possible.

Contents

Executive summary

The report reviews the progress so far of Local Trust's 2018 piloted offer of specialist support to Big Local areas (`support offer'). In this support offer, six partner organisations to Local Trust were providing support to Big Local areas. The support was area-based and spanned social enterprise; land-based projects; sports; urbanism/planning; communications; and behaviour change. The report reviews the process of rolling out the support offer and whether the pilot met the intended aims and expectations.

The original aims of the support offer were to:

* Respond to the diversifying needs of Big Local areas

* Support Big Local areas in accessing new knowledge and networks

* Build areas' confidence in working with a wider range of partners

* Ensure our support offer is more consistent with the broader ethos and approach of the Big Local programme

The research is based on in-depth interviews with areas receiving support, reps[1], support partners and Local Trust staff.[2]

Key report findings

While many of the support pilots are still at an early stage, some important benefits to the work have been identified. Areas noted that support partners have brought Big Local partnerships together with other people and organisations, such as council departments or local voluntary sector networks. One area has developed valuable knowledge of local planning departments, who they have already begun working with.

Interviewees also told us they valued how support partners had brought a fresh perspective and provided new ideas, provided practical suggestions which could be implemented, offered valuable specialist expertise, or helped areas to think more strategically about their goals and plans.

However, there were challenges. An initial challenge was that the information provided to areas about some offers did not always seem clear about the benefits or outputs and made some areas sceptical. To counter this, reps appear to play a key role in helping areas to understand support offers and apply it to the work they are already doing. And staff suggested there could be more effective ways to describe and promote support offers, such as using the testimonials of areas who have previously worked with these partners.

In some cases, support partners were perceived to lack local expertise and knowledge, and this highlighted that face-to-face time needs to be incorporated into support offers. On the other hand, some areas really valued the fresh perspective that outsiders can bring. There is a broader challenge for the support offer programme that while areas might be good at

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1 Reps are individuals appointed by Local Trust to offer tailored support to a Big Local area and share successes, challenges and news with the organisation and are a critical part of the Big Local delivery infrastructure.

2 Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live.

identifying how a support offer can fit into the work they are doing, they may not be able to recognise other types of support that they need.

In some cases, support partners were perceived to lack local expertise and knowledge, and this highlighted that face-to-face time needs to be incorporated into support offers. On the other hand, some areas really valued the fresh perspective that outsiders can bring. There is a broader challenge for the support offer programme that while areas might be good at identifying how a support offer can fit into the work they are doing, they may not be able to recognise other types of support that they need.

It is too early to say whether areas are becoming more confident to work with partners to the extent that they commission support independently, but some expressed an interest in commissioning further support from the partner they are working with. Match funding is viewed positively by areas, but to really develop areas' ability to hold partners to account and manage contracts independently, Local Trust may need to provide support specifically around managing contracts; for example, a clear brief on what is included in the whole support offer package.

Five of the six partner organisations were new to working with the Big Local model and some were also new to working with resident-led groups. Partners generally found Local Trust's approach flexible and geared towards meeting the needs of areas rather than expecting support partners to deal with two different clients. On the ground though, the model that some partners had developed did not always fit with what a Big Local area needs, and partners had to adapt, suggesting potential benefits of a more bespoke approach.

Support partners experienced the limited capacity of Big Local areas and volunteers; partnership members themselves also raised this as a reason why some projects had made less progress than expected. These capacity issues could be factored in more at the planning stage to accommodate for delays, difficulties scheduling meetings and the 'stop start' nature of things. Some suggested that all support offers should themselves add capacity in some way and that allowing areas to opt into support when they are ready for it, rather than during a time-limited window, would be preferable.

Partners generally liaised with a 'project lead' within the partnership. (A Big Local partnership is a group made up of at least eight people that guides the overall direction of a Big Local area). This means it is easier for the support partners to contact areas, and project leads themselves can generate enthusiasm and develop valuable skills. However, support partners also need to be aware that information is not always shared consistently across the partnership which can frustrate partnership members who are not the project lead. Some offers also rely on a breadth of engagement within the community, meaning that project leads have to put considerable time and effort into organising people to get involved. Reps' involvement is generally around promoting support offers to areas, explaining offers, helping with applications, and being prepared to add extra support if there are problems.

To prepare for and understand the nature of working with Big Locals, support partners value networking time with each other and other partners, as well as face to face time with reps and areas in advance of the offer being launched.

Local Trust staff were asked to reflect on how their role has changed towards the end of the research and whether we are meeting the original aims of the pilots. Staff felt that the support offer programme is, along with other programme support, helping to meet areas' needs and is moving towards a more resident-led ethos. But some felt we could still be more collaborative with areas when it came to identifying new support partners, being mindful of the power dynamic that can exist between the central funder and a Big Local area.

Introduction

This is the final report of a research project which explores the progress so far of a new piloted support offer working with partner organisations to provide area-level support. Six partner organisations are providing support in the form of advice, development, or delivery; most are working with fewer than 10 areas. The six partners are: UnLtd, Shared Assets, Street Games, Academy of Urbanism, Media Trust and Behavioural Insights Team (see table below for more information).

Pilot	No. of areas	Open callout or selected by LT	Timescale
UnLtd	19	Open	3 years
Academy of Urbanism	2	Selected	4 months
Behavioural Insights Team	1	Open	1 year
Street Games	5	Selected	1 year
Media Trust	5	Selected	8 months
Shared Assets	5	Open	1 year

They offer very different types of support, spanning social enterprise; land-based projects; sports; urbanism/planning; communications; and behaviour change. While all support partners have begun work in at least one Big Local area, the varied timescales of all of them means they are at quite different stages. Some areas were completing the process of agreeing terms of reference while one partner had almost finished their work in two areas.

The aims of the new support offer are to:

- Respond to the diversifying needs of areas

- Support areas in accessing new knowledge and networks

- Build areas' confidence in working with a wider range of partners

- Ensure our support offer is more consistent with the broader ethos and approach of the Big Local programme

The research reviews the process so far and explores whether the rollout of the offer is meeting the above aims. It is not an impact evaluation and does not look at the success of the individual organisations' offers. The research project's specific objectives were:

- To provide Local Trust with initial learning about the piloting of the new support offers, in terms of what is and is not working well, to enable us to make decisions about the support offers going forward

- To explore and capture the experience of areas and new partners working with Big local groups for the first time

- To test the extent to which the new pilot support offer is meeting its original intentions

- To provide a firm evidential basis against which decisions can be made about future support.

- To further understand the support needed for resident-led action in area

This report begins by reviewing Local Trust's initial expectations. The next section focuses on the experience of areas of the support partners: what value support partners have added and what challenges have been encountered, and the implications for areas' confidence in working with partners. The report then goes onto specifically look at Local Trust's role, in relation to how partners experience working with Big Locals and then discussing whether our role has changed in relation to the overall goals of the support pilots and the initial expectations.

How we completed this report

Our findings are based on interviews with staff, support partner organisations and Big Local areas receiving support from one of the six support partner organisations. We interviewed partner organisations and areas at two stages, initially towards the beginning of the work and then in more depth between July-August.

Key findings

Setting up: Initial expectations of the support offer

As noted in the introduction, there were four key objectives to the support offer rollout. The first staff focus group that we held as part of this research (October 2017) explored expectations in more depth, with some different opinions expressed about the potential of the support pilots.

Staff discussed that the support offer would mean Local Trust could better meet areas' needs, through partnering with a bigger range of organisations and expanding the capacity to manage this:

> "We have grown [the] staff team to be able to do this and to have more contact with areas; we have expanded [the] number of subcontractors we have. If an area had said to us in the past – we're struggling with this...Now we can signpost them to things we can support, we can match fund....[We are] trying to have a mixed portfolio for areas - recognising that they are quite different." (Local Trust staff member)

One staff member outlined two distinct categories of needs or "two camps" that the support offer programme would address. There are areas which have a low-risk appetite and need inspiration and momentum; and there are areas which have bold plans but require technical support or specialist expertise.

Staff talked about areas becoming confident to work with more partners to the extent that areas would be able to commission support directly, separate from Local Trust, and one staff member said: "in time we'd expect areas to commission [support organisations] directly or to commission something completely different". Related to this, staff felt that introducing match funding would mean areas have more buy in and would be more actively involved in the support they receive: "We'll ask areas to match fund so they are a bit more committed to it, they have a bit more buy in to what they are purchasing".

Some staff also saw these support offers as a way to give areas more control and move towards a more resident-led approach:

> "Our previous approach to support [was] paternalistic - we pretended to be not in control, letting people do what they wanted, but there was a tension between what we wanted to be and what we actually did." (Local Trust staff member)

Working with external organisations

Prior to taking up support offers, the areas involved in the research had different levels of experience of working with external organisations. In one area, a partnership member said that they "work with external organisations in all parts of [their] job" while in other areas, partnerships largely worked with local organisations to deliver activities rather than to commission support. This section will explore how working with the support partners has benefited areas and highlighted some challenges that have emerged. It will also discuss what we know about how areas feel about commissioning external support and match funding.

Value added by support partners

Despite some of the support offers having just started, areas and reps were already able to discuss the benefits of working with support partners. To begin with, areas noted that support partners have brought Big Local partnerships together with other people and organisations. This has increased areas' access to networks and their capacity, for example through bringing in the council to the work or building stronger links with local Voluntary and Community Sector infrastructure. In one area, the support partner was able to develop a relationship between the area and the council, which hadn't previously heard of Big Local. Another had developed valuable knowledge of working with local planning departments and potential opportunities like the community infrastructure levy (CIL).

The people interviewed as part of the research valued that the support partners were able to bring a fresh perspective and provide new ideas, while also staying focused on practical suggestions of what areas could actually do. One resident highlighted that "the most positive thing is that the [support partner] actually came up with some very workable suggestions that we can actually implement." Support partners also helped areas to think more strategically or focus more specifically on one project. Another rep had a similar perspective, noting that:

> "It's focused them on what needs to be done. Both the projects that they're looking at are long-term aspirations and have been from the beginning of the partnership. This really has, at least in theory, given them a way forward and a way to structure that to turn the aspiration into something concrete." (Rep)

This focus on a particular theme or project supported areas to think more critically about what they were doing, how they would make progress and ultimately what they were trying to achieve – reflecting staff's hope that some areas would be inspired by support partners Alongside this, areas also valued the specialist expertise that the support partners had.

According to one partnership member, bringing in the support partner meant that he was "learning as I go, picking up information and conversing with people who do these things professionally and have done for a long time".

Challenges

There were some challenges for areas in working with new support partners: on the information provided to areas about the offer, the model originally devised and knowledge of the local context.

To begin with, there seemed to be an initial challenge rooted in the information provided to areas about the offer, and how clear it was. The information that areas received, particularly when they were selected (and so had not proactively chosen to apply for the offer), seemed to result in scepticism about what the offer was and what benefit it would bring to the area. Yet when we spoke to areas where the support offer had progressed and, in some cases, a report had been delivered, they were often no longer sceptical because the partners did a good job.

> "I didn't really know what to expect, frankly. I thought a bunch of a strangers would come into our community, they'd swan around and say you ought to have that bigger or smaller. But they didn't, they spent time with us and amongst them there were a whole variety of skills...I was very pleasantly surprised." (Partnership chair)

The challenge for the rollout or expansion of these support offers is that initial information needs to be clear and appealing to get partnership members to buy into support, especially where it is open call-out (i.e., promoted and available to all Big Local areas) and/or match funded. Staff at the third focus group noted that there could be more effective ways to describe the offers, such as using area testimonials on video, which clearly lay out the support offer and not feel like a sales pitch. Testimonials would also need to avoid narrowing areas' perspectives to what has already been done and not on how a specific area could apply the offer in a way that works best for them.

Reps also played a role in supporting areas to overcome initial scepticism. Reps mentioned that, for some support offers, it was easier to promote a particular support offer if it tied in directly to an activity or theme that an area was working on. It was harder to promote offers that were not clear about the outputs or what the benefit of being involved in the support offer would be. The reps had an important role in supporting areas to understand the offer and apply it to the work they were already doing.

> "The community development worker couldn't see how it could help. Without the work that I did to help them understand I think it would have been easier for them to say that they didn't understand." (Rep)

There may be some areas which did not take up or apply for support because they did not get this clarity; this is outside the scope of this research but important to bear in mind.

Some people we interviewed (reps and partnership members) also expressed frustration that the support partners lacked local expertise and knowledge. This was sometimes based on general preconceptions of 'London based' organisations, which are not always accurate (several of the support partners have bases in different regions of the country). However, there were some tangible examples given where organisations lacked knowledge, and this created barriers locally:

> "They [support partner] seem to be missing that we are not like a city, we're not like anywhere else, it has its own microcosm of issues that I think they need to get their heads around before they even start working on it." (Partnership member)

In this case, the partnership member had wanted the support partner to spend more time in the area to get to know it in depth. Local Trust staff have also highlighted that areas really value face-to-face engagement and devoting time to this will help overcome this challenge. While not knowing the local context may be inherent in the process of bringing in new partners, there is also a positive effect - another interviewee valued the fresh perspective that outsiders can bring as mentioned above.

There was also some discussion from reps about areas that tend to be opportunistic rather than proactive about support offers. Areas might be good at identifying how a support offer can fit into the work they are doing but they are not as good at recognising support they need. This was also reflected in interviews when asked about other support they needed in their area. Often interviewees were not able to identify other support beyond the line of work they were already doing with the partner. This, however, can prevent them from being more strategic in their thinking.

How are the support offers enabling areas to commission support?

Given the fact that some support offers have yet to make much progress, it is too early to tell if the support offers will increase areas' confidence to commission other kinds of support. There are, however, areas that have already expressed an interest in commissioning further support from the partner they are working with and to continue with that line of work. One resident was in the process of contacting the support partner to commission more work from them:

> "Obviously, the next discussion point is where next for this. Are we going to commission them? In fact, I tried to contact them this morning about helping us to create plans for this project that we're submitting because we don't have the expert knowledge they have. It's really tapping into an expert pool that we don't have." (Partnership member)

In the third focus group, Local Trust staff noted that while this is an important objective for the support offer work, there is a step before this that is merely getting areas to 'do something' and break out of existing thinking. This, to staff, was equally as important as building confidence to commission services.

Areas' attitudes towards match funding

As noted above, Local Trust staff introduced match funding intending that this would increase accountability locally and that areas would feel as if they had a 'stake in the game'. On the whole, areas seem to think match funding is positive, as from their point of view, their investment is doubled:

> "If you put that in terms of value for money, you're getting 100% match in terms of investment, it's a no brainer really." (Partnership member)

Despite some logistical problems (see 'role of Local Trust' below) the match funding element is making areas more aware of what to expect and holding the support partners accountable for the work they are doing. In one area, there was an early problem between the area and support partner due to a miscommunication. In dealing with the problem, the rep highlighted that this probably helped the area be more assertive in their relationship with the partner:

> "In fact, that …early glitch probably helped. Because you learn through mistakes. [….] they'd been a bit passive up to that point. They realised they needed to be more assertive in these relationships." (Rep)

However, there may be a need for Local Trust to provide more support to areas around managing contracts and obtaining value for money. Although, as highlighted above, some areas are able to respond to problems, other areas do not say anything unless Local Trust staff actively ask how things are going. For support offers where match funding was required, areas were aware that they were committing a large amount of money and some told us they wanted more clarity over what the money was going towards and, even more importantly, what outputs they should expect. Areas and partners find that trying to agree terms of reference and overcome what areas perceive as "wooliness" can be a lengthy process. A transparent and clear brief on what is included in the 'whole package' would be helpful to give areas the tools they need to hold partners to account.

Local Trust's role in overseeing the programme

Support partners' experience of Local Trust and the Big Local model

Five of the six support partners were new to working with the Big Local model and some were also new to working with resident-led groups. For partner organisations, Local Trust's approach was seen as flexible, and designed to work towards the needs of the area. Where there were challenges, these were often around working within the Big Local model and showed a need to make partners aware of the reality of resident-led funding. Networking opportunities with each other and with areas were seen as one effective way to address this.

Flexibility to work towards needs of area

One of the benefits of Local Trust's approach that was highlighted by two support partners was that Local Trust makes it easy for partner organisations to work towards the needs of the area itself, rather than the support partner having to work towards the requirements of a funder as well an area which inevitably involves a 'trade off' in which the area's requirements may not be met.

> "Frankly it's helpful that we're not dealing with two clients, trying to satisfy what Local Trust want you to do and what the area want you to do." (Support partner)

There were some suggestions as to how this approach is achieved in practice. One partner appreciated that Local Trust didn't require lots of "onerous reports", meaning it was easier to focus on delivery for the area. Partners also liked the flexibility to develop the offer where necessary in order to work better for areas:

> "What I've liked about the way Local Trust works is it's quite flexible...and quite hands off. It's … enabled the space for us to discover and work with areas and develop useful things if that makes sense." (Support partner)

This suggests that our approach to managing support is generally consistent with the resident-led ethos of the Big Local programme. However, one partner felt that more flexibility was needed: because they were delivering a long-term support offer, they felt that a rigid approach to budgets and timescales was not helpful and there was a need to shift the balance towards more flexibility when running an offer which, in this case, spans several years.

Additionally, some support partners originally developed a model or way of working with community groups that didn't fit perfectly in Big Local areas. Agreeing the terms of reference between the partner and areas was a particular issue when areas wanted something different to what had previously been agreed between Local Trust and the support partner.

> *"We have outlined a model for engagement which we proposed with Local Trust and that was agreed. But actually, when we got to agreeing these with the areas, with partnerships, it turned out to be much more difficult."* (Support partner)

Interviewees and Local Trust staff discussed the potential benefits of a more bespoke offer to address this challenge. A bespoke offer could be more challenging to articulate and promote, but Shared Assets' 'menu of options' approach, which was developed through research and engagement with areas prior to launching the offer, was seen as a good way to allow areas to pick and choose aspects of the offer which would be most useful to the area. It is important to consider that not all partners will be able to tailor their offer in the same way and there is a risk of asking partners to be 'everything to everyone'.

Promotion and take-up of the offer

Three of the support offers were open call-out, promoted to all Big Local areas, and three were selected, meaning that Local Trust worked with support partners to identify suitable areas to receive that support and approached them directly. In practice, both approaches involve promoting the benefits of the offer, communicating it effectively (albeit at different scales), and securing 'buy in' from the area.

Support partners have mixed experience of promoting the offers. Several partners are working with fewer Big Local areas than anticipated at this stage, and two want to increase take-up or promotion, but perceived delays from Local Trust's end:

> *"'We have been trying to work with Local Trust over the summer to get the offer out to more local areas …. But we haven't made much progress with that…. I know Local Trust has been quite busy over the last few months."* (Support partner)

The September 2018 staff focus group discussed the reasons behind the limited promotion of some support pilots. Staff at Local Trust were understandably wary of partners pushing a 'hard sell' to Big Local areas, and some were also cautious about rolling out support offers more widely where there is limited capacity in the organisation to manage this. Following on from the pilots, rolling out a support offer may require thinking about how the offer is communicated and which areas it is and is not suitable for. From the partners' point of view, it would be helpful if this were reviewed on a planned basis with support partners made aware of developments in plans for rollout and review.

Capacity challenges

Limited capacity is a familiar challenge to Big Local. Many areas we interviewed raised this as an issue. For example, in one area, the lead partnership member on the project had got a new job and felt the project had lost momentum as a result; another explained that there had been limited progress made on the project because of his limited time and need to balance his 'work, family and hobby'. During the summer, many partnership members go on holiday, while there is also an increase in activities and events. This has made it hard to schedule initial meetings and progress the work. In one area, partners found it difficult to schedule meetings during the summer whereas in another, the work was put 'on hold' due to the immediate priorities of delivering summer activities in the area.

While this was not seen as a major challenge, our interviews suggested that these capacity issues could be factored in better prior to rollout. All partners emphasised that initial stages of relationship building and 'kick off' took longer than they had anticipated. Some felt that they had not been fully prepared for the amount of time it would take to 'lay the groundwork' in areas and the need to account for the "stop start" nature of things. Three support partners we interviewed suggested extending the length of the offer (either for new or existing work):

> "[We] realised that we probably need more time to build relationships and understanding if we do work with more areas. Given the limited resources, dealing with simple management issues, we need more time. More intensive from our side than we expected…We just have to give them more notice of events and to make sure that we work with partnerships to reach out to all stakeholders." (Support partner)

Towards the end of this research Local Trust staff suggested that some of the support offers have already been extended to accommodate these delays. As well as planning for delays, there might need to be more focus on developing or increasing the capacity within areas. While we didn't identify consistent gaps in the support offer based on interviews with areas, it was apparent that given the nature of volunteer-led partnerships and the limited capacity of areas, that the support offers must have an element of adding capacity alongside bringing consultants in to write a report. One of the support partners noted that they were in the process of working with Local Trust to adapt their offer to incorporate capacity development:

> "Our support is consultative, but they actually need people to do stuff so we're going to restructure the support that we offer – not just 'we're consultants coming into advice' but more...a limited time member of your development group." (Support partner)

The way support offers are structured can also mitigate or exacerbate these capacity challenges. Currently, support offers are rolled out to all areas at the same time, so that partners can start work with several areas at once. In effect, this may result in delays where the area is not ready to start work. One support partner felt that their model of support would be more suited to an 'on demand' or 'tap' style model, where areas could opt into and out of receiving support at any time: "having an open call and saying it has to be done in a year is maybe not the best way to deliver support to land based enterprises". A 'retainer' style model would have been difficult to implement during the pilot stage but may be more workable afterwards, so that there are several offers which areas can opt into at any time.

Involvement across the partnership

Although all support offers vary, in each Big Local area receiving support there was usually one project lead that had direct contact with the partners. This was often the worker, although in one area where the support offer was focused on the delivery of activities, a partnership member had taken the lead. The rep noted that this level of involvement has:

> "Built the skills and confidence of [the partnership member] as a local resident who has interest and some skills…[and] has really emerged as an experienced community leader through working with [the support partner]." (Rep)

The skills developed by this partnership member was highlighted by the rep as an important outcome of not just the support offers, but the overall Big Local programme.

But there are pitfalls of the 'project lead' approach. In one area, a partnership member who was not the lead felt that "nothing is being done" on a support partner project but noted that there could be activity going on in the background that they were unaware of. However, as Local Trust staff pointed out, the lead contact can be a 'champion' of the work rather than a 'gatekeeper', providing momentum and enthusiasm: "if you have someone who is interested, they can push the opportunity."

In addition to the project lead, different stakeholders have been involved in activities and workshops connected to support offers. These included partnership members, residents, local organisations and councils. Some topic-focused support offers, such as UnLtd or Street Games, may have a 'task group' overseeing the work.

For more strategic offers such as Academy of Urbanism which provide analysis and recommendations on 'fundamentals' such as an area's plan and priorities, there is a particular need to involve a broad range of residents and local organisations. Some areas will find this easier to achieve than others and we heard from staff that areas which were able to include these wider networks received a better-quality report with more substantial recommendations as a result.

Involvement of reps

Reps were mainly involved in promoting the support offers to areas and supporting them to submit applications where necessary. For selected (not open callout) areas, reps explained that they had to take time to digest what the offer was and apply that to the area to be able to explain how it would be applicable to them:

> "Often, this particular partnership, they don't read a lot and that's staff as well. The proposal was about 4-5 pages and I had to read it twice to get to grips with it myself to see how it could work but I don't think that was obvious to other people." (Rep)

Beyond promoting the support offer, reps noted they take a 'light touch approach' and are not generally involved in delivery but are able to support the area if there are any problems. For one rep this meant "looking at [the support offer] in a light touch way, following it with interest. It seems to be going well. If anything did go wonky, [I] would support in any way I could, liaising with Local Trust and seeking advice and guidance."

Overall, our findings suggest a need to make support partners aware that information is not always shared consistently across the partnership and that they should ensure that during the initial meetings with areas there is discussion of how communication will be disseminated. There is also a need to consider during the selection process whether partnerships have the breadth of engagement required for the research.

Networking and engagement

There are ways in which Local Trust can ensure support partners are well-prepared and well-informed for working with Big Local areas and that they anticipate common challenges such as limited volunteer capacity. Support partners valued the opportunity to talk to each other and other partners at the spring reps' day, but one interviewee felt that the session could have been longer. Face to face contact with reps and areas is also seen as valuable preparation that cannot easily be replicated elsewhere.

Do Local Trust staff feel that their role has changed?

As noted above, at the beginning of the rollout there were some expectations of how Local Trust's role in relation to support would change. As shown in the objectives of the support offer pilot, support offers were intended to give areas more choice, to better meet their needs and increase their access to new knowledge and networks and reflect the resident-led ethos of Big Local. They were also intended to develop areas' confidence in commissioning support, whether that be through Local Trust or elsewhere, and encourage more local control and 'buy in' in part through match funding. (As a caveat, a maximum of 40 Big Local areas are receiving support from one of these six organisations, of which 19 are receiving support from UnLtd, a historic partner. So, for most Big Local areas, their relationship with Local Trust has not been directly affected by the rollout).

Since the offer was rolled out, interviews and the September 2018 focus group generally showed a belief that Local Trust's role has shifted to being more responsive to residents' needs: "We know more about the areas now and we can use that to support them in different ways." The selection of the six organisations was based on a balance of what Local Trust think areas need and where we can add value, with two main categories of need: technical support and advice to overcome specific stumbling blocks and introducing inspiration and new ways of thinking to areas that are struggling to deliver.

It was also noted that support offers are part of a broader programme of support, which collectively responds to areas' diversifying needs and provides access to new knowledge and networks. This programme also includes learning clusters, new national events, and a changing rep role.

Some reps we interviewed perceived things slightly differently, with a view that Local Trust was becoming more 'top down' through partnerships with more national organisations. One rep described this perception, without necessarily endorsing it themselves:

> "[There are concerns that] nationally brokered partnerships are clumsy at a local level on a number of levels.... One is where did it come from, what's the context, who's pushing it - all that sort of stuff. [Occasionally it is a question of] 'you've just come to pump us full of information and then swanned of." (Rep)

Overall, our findings suggest there is a diversity of views, among staff and reps, on how directive Local Trust should be (and is) in this area. While Local Trust staff pointed out that overall, our support offer has expanded to offer more choice and more relevant options for Big Local areas, some also felt that there could be a "directive" element to the ways in which support offers are introduced and promoted: "if someone is on an area visit and you hear something, it feels to the area it is quite directive". The resident-led ethos notwithstanding, some staff felt that there is still a power dynamic between Local Trust as a

funder and Big Local areas, and that the latter may feel a 'pressure' to volunteer for something being promoted nationally.

Going forward there was a sense that as an organisation Local Trust could do more to select and introduce support offers and new partnerships in a more collaborative way. Interviews with partners also brought up some considerations about how much control we want to retain over delivery. One partner organisation felt that they would need to 'ask permission' from Local Trust before extending their work within a Big Local area, which is arguably in contrast to our stated goal of giving areas more confidence to commission support directly.

Conclusion

Our findings are promising in suggesting that the support offer programme is starting to meet the original aims and expectations. Although some are still at early stages, we heard good examples of support partners increasing areas' access to new knowledge and networks, for example facilitating good links with the local authority or providing access to a wider range of voluntary sector communities. Areas have also been exposed to new knowledge through those partners who, according to areas, provide fresh perspectives or new ideas or on the other hand, offer specific specialist expertise or technical knowledge that helps areas meet their aims.

Some challenges have emerged, some of which have been addressed or overcome. Initially, some of the support offers were not clear to areas in terms of their purpose, highlighting the benefits of promoting offers through the direct testimony of Big Locals who have experienced them where possible. Some partners were perceived to lack sufficient knowledge of the local community. This reinforced the importance of support offers which build in plenty of time for face-to-face engagement, which is important to areas. A broader challenge for identifying support partners is areas recognise other types of support that they need.

Our research suggested that it is too early to judge whether areas are becoming confident to commission support independently, but we heard that some areas are planning to commission further support from the partner organisations. While introducing match funding seems to have been positive, there are ways in which Local Trust could provide more information here to help areas hold partners to account. For match funded support, a transparent and clear outline of what is included in the 'whole package' would be helpful to give areas the tools they need to hold partners to account.

Our findings also provided insight into how partner organisations experience working with Big Local and Local Trust. Having started work with areas, some partners felt that they needed to adapt the model they had anticipated delivering. Partners felt positively about the flexible approach Local Trust took which allowed them to meet areas' needs, but both partners and staff reflected on the possibilities of developing more bespoke offers.

Some partners would have liked more opportunities to promote the support offer and were working with fewer areas than they had anticipated. Our findings suggest that before they start work with Big Locals, partners would benefit from information and face-to-face meetings to deepen their understanding of the reality of working within a resident-led funding model. For example, support partners need to be aware of capacity challenges, and the different ways information is shared across a partnership; and that they should ensure that during the initial meetings with areas there is discussion of how communication will be disseminated.

Local Trust staff felt that their role had changed to be more responsive to areas' needs, even whilst there were different views over how directive we are. There was still a sense that we could be more collaborative with areas in identifying support that would meet their need. On the other hand, areas themselves seem to struggle to identify other support they need outside of what is already provided. Introducing more processes that capture reps and areas' views may help better meet the diverse needs of areas and would also help encourage areas to keep considering where they would benefit from external support.

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live. We believe there is a need to put 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 do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding through our work supporting local communities make their areas better places to live, and to draw on the learning from our work to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place

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