
Community Leadership Academy: Evaluation and learning so far

Introduction

The Community Leadership Academy (CLA) provides support for the people who make Big Local happen.¹ The CLA helps to develop community leadership and build a legacy of confident, networked leaders, so that they can help benefit and shape the future of their communities. Participants take part in a range of individual and group sessions, including personal coaching, to work on their own strengths and leadership style, develop leadership in others and set strategy.² It is delivered by a consortium of Koreo, the Young Foundation and Northern Soul. In October 2019, [Just Ideas](#) and the [Institute for Voluntary Action Research](#) (IVAR) were appointed by [Local Trust](#) as the evaluation and learning partner.

In this briefing, IVAR and Just Ideas share some of their learning from the Academy's work so far.

Getting started - nomination and adaptation

The CLA has successfully identified and recruited existing and emerging leaders in Big Local areas, supporting them via individual coaching, group sessions and sharing skills and knowledge.

The CLA participants have been diverse in terms of their educational and professional backgrounds, existing roles (within and outside Big Local partnerships)

¹ Big Local is a resident-led funding programme providing people in 150 areas in England with £1.15m each to spend across 10–15 years to create lasting change in their neighbourhoods.

² More information about the CLA is available at <https://localtrust.org.uk/other-programmes/community-leadership-academy/about-the-community-leadership-academy/>

and local contexts, although demographic information (e.g. gender, ethnicity, etc.) has not been recorded.

Most participants do not see themselves as leaders and would not have considered taking part without being nominated. The nomination process³ helped to boost confidence.

“Being nominated really built me up. Lots of people think I’m very confident – but I come across as being more confident than I really am. Something knocked the stuffing out of me a few years ago, I locked myself away, and it took years to rebuild myself.” (CLA participant)

In 2020, the programme moved online due to COVID-19. Despite the challenges of this adaptation – turning a residential-based programme into a remote curriculum – participants still felt supported by the CLA and, for most, being part of the programme has been an empowering and positive experience.

“I understand more about myself as a community leader, my way of being, who I am and why I am that way.” (CLA Participant)

What’s worked?

Individual coaching

The 1:1 coaching has been central to the leadership journey and most valued by participants. The reasons this has been successful is down to effective matching of coach and coachee by the delivery consortium, and coaches establishing positive relationships with participants. These open and trusting coaching sessions have enabled participants to focus on personal development, problem solving, and have supported their learning about different leadership styles and practice. This should enable participants to make a difference to influencing and advocacy work in their communities.

“To have someone that is connected to you, not your colleague, or your friends, or family – but someone that is a professional and has no agenda [...] apart from helping you to face the right way, mentally being able to understand certain things.” (CLA Participant)

We have seen participants increase in confidence. For example, feeling empowered to take on more responsibility (or delegate more!) and be more assertive in their Big Local partnership setting.

“I think more about how I navigate my own wellbeing whilst learning how to lead effectively.” (CLA Participant)

Peer support and wellbeing

An outcome of the programme has been the importance of the emotional and wellbeing support it has provided through peer support – this being particularly appreciated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although in-person meetings (and

³ The nomination process involved participants either self-nominating or being nominated by people in their Big Local area.

the usual informal interactions that would take place there) have not been possible, tools such as a WhatsApp group have enabled participants to share issues and news outside online sessions.

“I’m opening up – asking more questions. I’m using some of the approaches from the sessions. I’ve got depression and until a couple of years ago I would never have shared that. Now I’m trying to do stuff around mental health [with the partnership] – two to three years ago I wouldn’t have mentioned that. I realised that in hearing from other people [the experience of varying mental health is common].” (CLA Participant)

Online delivery sessions have helped participants feel relaxed, able to ask questions, build on each other’s ideas and work openly in small groups. We have seen existing relationships develop and new ones form, with individuals finding connections across Big Local areas and giving support to one another. Working online has enabled participation from those who might find it difficult to attend a physical meeting. Recordings of online sessions have meant that those who could not attend a session still felt involved.

“Having the opportunity to talk to people from other areas, is brilliant. Other Big Locals are at different stages. We’re just doing our plan for the next five years. It’s interesting to know what they’ve done and how they’ve done [it]. We have [experience of] creating a community food hub – so we can share on that.” (CLA Participant)

What else is there to learn?

We’re seeing some early evidence that taking part in the CLA contributes to changes in the way Big Local partnerships operate – moving towards a more distributed and empowering form of leadership. There is a recognition and celebration of the shared leadership that already exists in Big Local areas and an exciting opportunity to continue exploring the role of the CLA as a gentle but determined challenge to more individual or ‘top down’ styles of leadership - championing collective action that releases wider community power.

What’s next for the evaluation and learning work?

The next phase of our work supporting evaluation and learning of the CLA will focus more on its impact at a community level, rather than solely on individuals’ development. This reflects the expansion of the CLA to include more participants and a wider range of community leaders.

We want to know how participating in the CLA affects Big Local participants, but also those from a different type of group or context.

As the CLA expands to include more participants, from a wider range of contexts over a longer period, we will follow the journey of groups of participants to see how different contexts (e.g. geographic; partnership dynamics) influence change.

Over time, this learning will help contribute insights into what it takes to build community leadership that positively influences Big Local partnerships, groups and

the wider community. This will be relevant in the current and ongoing aftermath of COVID-19.