
Challenges and support needs of partnerships

A version of this paper was published internally by Local Trust in 2021. This version has been lightly edited to make it accessible for a general audience, with core terms and concepts explained wherever possible. Please refer to [our website](#) for more information about the structure and goals of Local Trust.

Introduction

This brief presents findings from the 2020 partnership members' survey. The survey was conducted from June to August 2020. It asked partnership members¹ about their experiences as part of the decision-making group in their Big Local area.² In total, we received 1,018 responses across 148 Big Local partnerships. This paper looks at responses to two open-ended questions:

- Thinking prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, what was the main challenge your Big Local partnership faced since 2019?
- What support do you think your Big Local partnership needs to achieve its goals?

Key points

- Partnership members highlighted difficulties with community engagement, including the recruitment of volunteers and partnership members, and generally raising awareness of their Big Local programme. They also stated a need for support with some of these fundamental aspects of the Big Local programme.
- Delivery of the Big Local plan proved a challenge when there were large complex projects planned, such as those involving assets. Maintaining momentum on projects, dealing with conflict within partnerships, and difficult relationships with local authorities were key challenges faced by partnerships.
- Partnership members wanted specific guidance and training on a variety of topics including dealing with conflict, governance, IT, and strategic planning. Alongside this, partnership members also wanted specific support to help them plan the legacy of Big Local.

¹ A Big Local partnership is a group made up of at least eight people that guides the overall direction of the Big Local programme in each area.

² Big Local areas are neighbourhoods selected by the National Lottery Community Fund to receive at least £1m. Local Trust is working with 150 Big Local areas.

- While there were some challenges highlighted around the existing support partnerships receive, there was general praise for the quality of the support offered including the support from the rep and Local Trust’s support offers.³

Methods

The answers to the two open-ended questions from the 2020 partnership members’ survey were coded and analysed thematically. This enabled us to see what challenges and support needs were most mentioned by partnership members. More in-depth analysis of these themes revealed respondents’ specific challenges and requests for support from Local Trust.

Findings

This paper focuses on the key findings that are most relevant for Local Trust. The two questions on challenges and support are looked at in turn, with additional feedback covering existing support also incorporated. Themes are presented in order of the most referenced by survey respondents, to least referenced.

Part one: What was the main challenge Big Local partnerships faced in the last year?

The three main themes in the responses to this question were (1) community engagement, (2) delivering the Big Local plan and projects, and (3) relationships and networks. Some challenges were not included here due to overlap with other themes or a low number of mentions from respondents.

Table 1.1 Summary of main challenges

Challenge theme	Challenge sub-themes	Number of references
1. Engagement (273)	• Getting people engaged and involved in the partnership	167
	• Raising awareness	38
	• Getting specific groups and people engaged and involved	31
2. Delivering the Big Local Plan and projects (186)	• Maintaining momentum and progress	33
	• Delivering complex projects and activities	23
3. Relationships and networks (87)	• Relationships with local authorities	35
	• Dealing with conflict	32

³ Local Trust provides residents involved in Big Local support to develop and deliver their plans. More information is available here <https://localtrust.org.uk/big-local/support-from-big-local/>

1) Engagement

Getting people engaged and involved in the partnership

Respondents spoke of the continued challenge of engaging local people in Big Local, specifically getting residents actively involved as partnership members and volunteers. There were several reasons behind this challenge, such as: poor communication with the local community; perceived lack of interest; misunderstandings that Big Local is council-run; the partnership being a small group of older members; and situations where residents joined partnerships but only briefly.

"...The main challenge has been the difficulties engaging with local residents and gaining their support and interest in the work we are doing. We are a very small team of people, mostly in a similar age group and background, which does not reflect the demographics of the locality." (Survey respondent)

Raising awareness

Respondents also spoke of the challenges they faced in raising awareness of Big Local's ethos, projects, and activities to residents. They perceived that parts of their communities aren't aware of what has been achieved. Several reasons emerged such as the lack of a permanent local base, inability to connect with a diverse range of residents, limited ties across the community, and challenges in communicating what the Big Local programme is about.

Getting specific groups and people engaged and involved in Big Local

Partnership members wanted to see more people included and a diversity of people in their partnerships and participating in community activities. Partnerships wanted more young people, migrant community members, and residents from different ethnic minorities to get involved.

"We are a relatively small partnership, with a majority of older residents, and I feel that we could have a more diverse partnership." (Survey respondent)

2) Delivering the Big Local plan and projects

Maintaining momentum and progress

Respondents focused on the impact of COVID-19 on the delivery of their projects and activities. Work stalled, stopped altogether, or changed to meet COVID-19 government restrictions. This was an even greater challenge for those areas that were already facing barriers to their progress. While many partnerships were able to use Zoom to continue work and bring people together, respondents felt this was not the same as being able to meet face-to-face and maintaining momentum was a challenge.

"It has been difficult negotiating the pandemic because it hit just as we were beginning to work as a team."

"COVID struck at the same time as movement from one plan to the next and change in workers as well as the old worker [being] furloughed. [It made] movement to next exciting stage difficult. However, we have [a] new well-grounded plan to go forward. For me the face-to-face contact with local likeminded residents was important and that has...[been] very constrained."

(Survey respondents)

Delivering complex projects and activities

Partnership members responded that there were challenges in delivering larger, more complex projects. These bigger projects were often related to community assets such as purchasing or renovating a building or the development of community spaces for sport and leisure. The challenges included structural problems, issues with planning permission and the need for expert advice.

"There were problems finding the right experts and advice to get our housing scheme off the ground."

"Our main challenge is still ongoing. We are negotiating a lease for the building that was taken on a 'gentlemen's handshake'. This has caused no end of problems and it is looking likely we may walk away, as we are being asked to pay rent as well as take on all responsibility for repairs to the building."

(Survey respondents)

3) Relationships and networks

Relationships with the local authorities

Partnership members stated that there had, at times, been difficulties in their relationships with local authorities, particularly their local council. These difficulties occurred for a variety of reasons including when decisions made by the local authority were delayed or existing decisions subsequently withdrawn. This meant that services closed or access to facilities used by the community were removed. There were also frustrations with important information being delayed or withheld by local authorities.

"The bureaucracy and risk averse attitude that is the local authority, and the seemed lack and/or delay of decision-making being made by them that hampers our plans." (Survey respondent)

Dealing with conflict

Negative relationships and their dynamics have proved a challenge in some partnerships. There have been incidences of conflict, misunderstanding and difficulties in the decision-making process. In some situations, one or two partnership members dominate while other partnership members are viewed as passive or “going along” with decisions. Other challenges reported included the perception that individuals are pursuing personal agendas, partnership members having vastly different backgrounds and skills, or the use of tactics that are felt to be unfair to unduly influence others.

"It was sometimes difficult to come together for decisions [...] One or two people were quite dominant and swayed the way others thought and made decisions." (Survey respondent)

Part two: What support do you think your Big Local partnership needs to achieve its goals?

Partnership members stated an interest in support covering three different themes: (1) increasing resident engagement, (2) skills and development for partnership members, and (3) support with their legacy planning.

Table 1.2 Summary of support needs

Support theme	Specific support needs	Number of references
1. Engagement (184)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How to increase resident engagement	184
2. Partnership skills and development (197)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Core skills	95
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Business skills	41
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Governance	35
3. Legacy (75)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Business planning and future funding	55
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Becoming a legal entity	16

1) Engagement

The support that partnership members wanted most was how to effectively engage with their communities in a way that increases resident participation and leads to more or different partnership members. They specifically wanted support on how to engage new partnership members, how to promote their work and spread accurate messages across the whole community, and how to develop stronger community ties. Increased membership would help reduce dominance of some partnership members and to gather fresh ideas to reinvigorate partnerships: “fresh ideas and a great driving force to move forward”. The interest in support around engagement sits alongside the above finding showing that

respondents felt that low engagement was the main challenge for partnerships, suggesting that support on this topic is essential across the programme.

2) Skills and development for partnership members

Partnership members identified different types of development that could build capacity in their partnerships and address challenges.

Table 1.3: Development and skills themes

Development theme	Specific development needs	Number of references
1. Core skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategy or strategic thinking • Networking with other Big Local areas • Decision making • Support with conflict • Working in partnership with others 	95
2. Business skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contacts and contract management • Performance management and reaching targets • Managing workers and volunteers • IT skills 	41
3. Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management structures and accountability • Conflicts of interest 	35

3) Legacy

Alongside the skills development mentioned above, partnership members wanted specific support with planning for their legacy and understanding their options when Big Local closes.

Table 1.4 Summary of legacy support needs

Legacy support theme	Specific support needs	Number of references
1. Business planning and future funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge on the options available to partnerships once Big Local ends • How to plan a sustainable funding model • Knowledge and skills around finance, funding and investment 	55
2. Becoming a legal entity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge on how to set up and become a constituted body • What it means to be or run a local entity 	16

- How to be independent of Local Trust

Thoughts on existing support

We asked partnership members what support they would need to achieve their Big Local goals. As part of their responses, many respondents commented on the existing support offered by Local Trust and by their local partners. Overall, respondents praised the quality of the existing support with some recommendations for improvement.

Support from local partners

Partnership members wanted to see improved relationships with local partners to achieve more together. Greater support from local partners was viewed as valuable to strengthening Big Local's standing with local authorities and to prevent duplication of service provision. Partnership members also spoke of successful relationships that are built on collaboration, support, co-operation, and transparency. But there was also a need for partnerships to trust outsiders and, reciprocally, a need for local partners to be willing to "take a chance and do things differently".

Support from Big Local reps

Partnership members valued the support from reps and spoke of how they benefit from their advice and experience. Overall, there was a call for continued rep support and high praise for the work of reps as "invaluable" and "excellent".

Support from Local Trust

Partnership members also valued the support received from Local Trust staff directly. Overall, positive relationships have been built between many partnership members and Local Trust with the perception that Local Trust provides "more than enough expertise". For some, there is room for improvement in terms of slow responses to partnership queries. For example, one partnership member highlighted the need for "Local Trust to come back slightly quicker on decisions when needed".

Support from the Locally Trusted Organisation (LTO)⁴

Partnership members broadly valued the support received from their LTO. There is some need for improvement in support from a small minority of LTOs in terms of timely and accurate financial reporting. There was also some frustration with the lack of LTO involvement or alternatively too much bureaucracy, micro-management and red tape. Because of this, some respondents spoke of an interest in replacing or becoming their own LTO.

Conclusion and implications for Local Trust

This brief presented findings from the 2020 partnership members survey, specifically looking at open-ended questions where partnership members were asked to state their partnership's biggest challenges and the support, they would need to achieve their goals.

Engagement emerged as the biggest challenge faced by partnerships, with respondents keen to attract greater involvement of residents in both Big Local activities and the Big Local partnership. There were also members who felt their board needed more diversity and aspired to be more inclusive. Both the findings on challenges and support highlighted how

⁴ A locally trusted organisation (LTO) is the organisation chosen by people in a Big Local area or the partnership to administer and account for funding. In addition, they may deliver activities or services on behalf of a partnership

partnerships wanted to learn how to better promote the work that they do in their communities.

The survey was sent out in the summer of 2020 when Big Local areas were over six months into the COVID-19 pandemic. The shift online meant that many partnership members experienced a slowing or even halting of activities which they found challenging to the overall progress of Big Local. Some respondents wanted to refresh or reinvigorate their work and this links with their interest in engaging new partnership members and developing new skills that can reboot partnerships, Big Local areas or both.

Large, complex projects were noted as the most challenging to plan and deliver. We know from our previous research into hubs and community assets that these projects often serve as a flagship for Big Local partnerships and are closely tied to an area's legacy. Yet challenges arise as these projects are often wrapped up in bureaucracy and require more elaborate specialist skills and expertise. There was often a requirement to work with the decisions of local authorities, which led to fraught relationships. To mitigate these challenges there was an interest in support around issues such as working in partnership with others, creating and managing legal entities and financial planning and fundraising. It is clear from the development suggestions that many partnership members are keen to develop their skills for them to sustain activities to 2026 and beyond.

Partnership members clearly value the support offered by Local Trust, as do those who have successful relationships with local external partners. The findings also demonstrated how the existing support offer from Local Trust, including reps and LTOs, has been integral to boosting partnership members' achievements. As partnerships begin to plan for their legacy, Local Trust will need to consider how it can best support partnership members with some of the themes identified in this paper, while also looking ahead to how the future removal of support may impact partnerships, their members, and their legacy.

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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