
Big Local partnerships and the public sector: scoping paper

A version of this paper was published internally by Local Trust in December 2020. This version has been lightly edited to make it accessible for a general audience, with core terms and concepts explained wherever possible. A commissioned piece of research followed this scoping paper, which will be available on [our website](#). Please refer to our website for more information about the structure and goals of Local Trust.

Introduction

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. Big Local areas have been given a pot of money to make positive change in their area.

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. This paper explores what we know about Big Local partnerships¹ working with the public sector.

We adopt a broad definition of the public sector that includes private or third sectors delivering public services (e.g., housing associations).

Background: communities and the public sector

Several government programmes and initiatives have been introduced over the decades with the intention of empowering or transferring more power from the state to communities. There are positive examples of communities running services, controlling assets and creating new spaces for engagement. But there are issues relating to communities not knowing the rules of the game, public sector hierarchy and aversion to risk, and the difficulty of challenging structural inequalities.

There has been recent focus on the public sector's relationship with communities. Some argue that the public sector needs reform to give more power and resources to communities, and that

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

devolving power 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 (e.g. Kaye, 2020). Organisations such as New Local call for communities to have more decision-making control and power over local resources and over the planning, design and delivery of local public services.

Some argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity to positively change the relationship between communities and the public sector. We have seen how some communities were able to respond quickly to the pandemic and fill gaps left by the public sector; and this is seen as evidence of the strength of communities and what they can offer.

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

The evaluation of the New Deal for Communities (NDC) programme found improved relationships with local delivery agencies and local authorities, a closer relationship with senior people in agencies involved in the programme, and an improved perception of the area on behalf of said agencies (Batty et al, 2010). However, it also found agency re-organisations and staff turnover at local authorities posed challenges to these relationships (Batty et al, 2010).

In some programmes, there was a lack of trust due to the perception that previous community development programmes had failed communities (Holtom, 2019). 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 (Batty et al, 2010).

Unlike the New Deal for Communities, Big Local is not government funded and is resident-led in structure, meaning that the focus is on residents making decisions and deciding how to spend their funding, not external partners. 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 relationships with public bodies?

Working with the public sector will help partnerships deliver their Big Local plans and achieve the outcomes they have identified for their areas. There are other reasons why these relationships can be good for Big Local partnerships, listed below.

- 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 help deliver 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 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 (McCabe et al, 2019). The partnership

itself can act a space where residents and agencies can come together to talk, address issues and come up with solutions (Baker et al, 2016). These are not exhaustive lists but give a sense of the value in these relationships for both.

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

Based on a survey of Local Trust's reps² (Local Trust, 2020), we learned that 132 Big Local partnerships are working with public agencies to deliver their plans. These agencies include:

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

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

What is the nature of these relationships?

Data suggests partnerships have relationships with the public sector in a number of capacities, including:

- funding public bodies to deliver projects, activities or services
- being funded by public bodies 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.

² Individuals appointed by Local Trust to offer tailored support to a Big Local area and share successes, challenges and news with the organisation.

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. 72 Big Local areas have purchased or funded the creation of a significant physical asset (Local Trust, 2020). 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 a survey of Big Local partnership members discuss the 'red tape' and bureaucracy of council processes (Local Trust, 2018).

Members of Big Local partnerships include a variety of people from the public sector. These include councillors/officers, school reps/head teachers, housing associations and the police. 78 Big Local partnerships have a representative from a public agency on the partnership (Local Trust, 2020).

Internal data within Local Trust suggests that around 24 Big Local areas have a public body as their Locally Trusted Organisation (LTO). The most common are local authorities and councils, followed by housing associations and schools/academies.

The quality of relationships between partnerships and public bodies

The 2020 survey of Big Local partnership members shows that 86 per cent of respondents feel that they have good working relationships with external partners (Local Trust, 2020a). The majority also feel that they have good or excellent relationships with local councillors, councils, local schools and the local police. Less than half of respondents felt they had good or excellent relationships with their local health providers. Relationships with councils can vary across areas. Some collaborate, others have a sporadic connection and some keep councillors at arm's length (Tjoa, 2018).

Our research on responses to COVID-19 found that the pandemic has not changed relationships with public bodies but strengthened good relationships that already existed and exacerbated tensions already present in relationships (McCabe et al, 2020).

What challenges can Big Local partnerships experience in these relationships?

Power dynamics

Some partnerships lack understanding of local power holders along with the skills needed to navigate local structures (McCabe et al, 2017). However, some partnerships are attuned to local power structures and are lobbying, challenging and influencing them for the benefit of the community. The majority of partnership members' survey respondents in 2020 felt they could influence local decision-making; but at 64 per cent this is not as strong as it could be (Local Trust, 2020a).

Resident councillors 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, this 'dual role' can also lead to potential conflicts of interest and may encourage other resident members to defer to them because of their role (McCabe et al, 2017).

Public sector bureaucracy, culture and resources

The public sector landscape itself can be complex, with different bodies, remits and structures to navigate. Within this, public bodies each have their own bureaucracy and culture that areas are expected to understand and work with. Councils have different teams for different areas, with a lack of communication and coordination between them which causes delays. Having a named ally within the public body can help areas navigate complex systems, but not all areas will have access to this (Baker et al, 2016).

In terms of culture and ways of working, councillors sometimes prefer to work with those who understand how councils work. This can make it hard for partnership members who do not and elevates the status of those who do (McCabe et al, 2019).

Public bodies who do not understand the principles of Big Local can also be a challenge. Previous research highlights the need to regularly reiterate the key messages about the Big Local programme, such as the ethos, timeframe and funding (Baker et al, 2016).

Reductions in public sector budgets and capacity strain relationships (Baker et al, 2016). In open responses to the 2018 partnership members survey, some respondents noted that they were plugging gaps in council budgets or that the council only wanted them for the funding they could provide. In previous research exploring relationships with health agencies cuts, mergers and outsourcing were all flagged as challenges faced by partnerships (Baker et al, 2016).

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, trying to engage with a council with decision making powers that is far away can make it difficult for partnerships to build relationships and to influence (McCabe et al, 2020). 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 prevents them from brokering relationships at a more strategic level (McCabe et al, 2019). Where relationships exist, they are sometimes at an operational level, as opposed to with those with a strategic oversight and influence. 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 (Baker et al, 2016).

Potential topics of interest and research questions

The focus of this scoping paper has been intentionally broad to offer an overview of what we know and what we don't. We know how many Big Local partnerships have relationships with public sector bodies and that they have a sense of which public bodies they work with and how. We have some understanding about how partnership members feel about the quality of these relationships and the broad challenges they face. 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?

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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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