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Big Local relationships with public agencies

Research report
May 2022

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Authorship and acknowledgements

This report has been written by Leila Baker, Véronique Jochum, Helen Garforth and Richard Usher and is based on research carried out by the authors together with Graeme Fancourt, Amardeep Kainth, Lisa Meaney and Charlotte Pace.

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About this report

This report was commissioned by Local Trust to understand relationships between Big Local areas and the public agencies they were connecting with and sits within a wider context of growing policy emphasis on public involvement in local decision-making.

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Contents

Use of terms associated with the Big Local programme	4
Executive summary	5
1. Introduction	9
1.1 Background	9
1.2 Purpose	10
1.3 Approach and methods.....	10
2. What relationships exist and why?.....	12
2.1 Which public agencies do Big Local partnerships have relationships with?.....	13
2.2 What is the purpose of relationships with public agencies?.....	15
2.3 Who holds the relationships with public agencies?	17
2.4 How closely do Big Local areas and public agencies work together?	18
3. What makes relationships work?	20
3.1 What makes for an effective relationship?	20
3.2 Key factors affecting relationships with public agencies.....	21
3.3 Big Local partnerships and power	24
4. What are the outcomes of these relationships?.....	26
4.1 Local authorities	27
4.2 Housing associations	28
4.3 Schools	29
4.4 Health agencies	30
5. Conclusion and messages for public agencies	32
Bibliography	35
Appendix A: Case study examples from the research	36
Appendix B: Methodology	44

Use of terms associated with the Big Local programme

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

Big Local area refers to the Big Local areas that took part in the research.

Big Local partnership refers to a group made up of at least eight people that guides the overall direction of a Big Local area.

Each Big Local partnership is required to produce a **Big Local plan** which is a document they write for themselves, their community and Local Trust. It is a guide and action plan that the partnership can follow, share and use to get others involved.

Big Local worker: Many Big Local partnerships fund workers to support the delivery of Big Local. Big Local workers are paid individuals, as opposed to those who volunteer their time.

Locally trusted organisation (LTO): A locally trusted organisation is the organisation chosen by people in a Big Local area or the partnership to administer and account for funding, and/or deliver activities or services on behalf of a partnership. Areas might work with more than one LTO depending on the plan and the skills and resources required.

Big Local reps are individuals appointed by Local Trust to offer tailored support to a Big Local area.

Executive summary

Local Trust commissioned this research in order to understand relationships between Big Local areas and the four most common types of public agencies (Local Trust, 2021) they were connecting with: local authorities, housing associations, schools and health agencies.

The research will be of interest to public agencies and people working in communities who want to achieve lasting change and recognise that they are more likely to succeed if they work together. It sits within a wider context of growing policy emphasis on public involvement in local decision-making. How this translates on the ground, in different communities and public agencies, varies hugely.

This research is about what can be learned from the rich variety of experience in Big Local areas and the public agencies they have worked with. It builds on previous experiences of collaboration between communities and public agencies. From this, we know that context and history affect relationships between communities and public agencies; that considerable effort is required to understand and navigate different public agency structures and processes; and that it takes time to build trust on both sides.

Through creative workshops, facilitated conversations and interviews with 38 people working in public agencies and 65 people in communities, the research has addressed four questions:

- To what extent are Big Local areas developing relationships with public agencies?
- What are the outcomes of these relationships?
- To what extent are these relationships effective?
- How can communities and public agencies best work together now and in the future?

Working with public agencies: Relationship insights

- The majority of all 150 Big Local areas have partnerships with public agencies – most commonly with local authorities, followed by public agencies in education, housing and health.
- The purpose of these relationships fell under six categories: funding, asset and infrastructure, co-design and co-delivery, sharing and networking, routes into community or public agency, and informal support and guidance.
- These relationships require time and energy. They could come and go, affected by changes in public agency structures or personnel, or the energy and capacity of the individuals involved.
- Big Local areas identified eight criteria for effective relationships covering: mutual knowledge and understanding, trust and respect; common language and shared goals; defined roles but willingness to be flexible; and the capacity and resources to follow through with agreed actions and decisions.

- Whether a Big Local partnership knows its own power and how to use it was also critical to the effectiveness of their relationships.
- Having the paid capacity of a community or development worker who could help maintain momentum was identified as a key ingredient in building relationships between communities and public agencies.

Types of relationships

Having an awareness of the types of relationship that exist appeared helpful. Three broad types emerged:

- **Powerful allies** who are supportive of the Big Local area and have the power to turn ideas into action.
- **Friends and acquaintances** who have good relationships with the Big Local area and can be called upon for support when needed.
- **Clients and contractors** with whom the Big Local area has a contractual arrangement to carry out work.

Summary of relationship outcomes

Relationships between communities and public agencies achieved positive outcomes (laid out in the table below) for the Big Local partnership, the public agency and the wider community in question. These outcomes can interact with each other in various ways.

Positive outcomes for the Big Local partnership	Positive outcomes for the public agency	Positive outcomes for the Big Local area
Profile, visibility and a positive reputation, which helped them to build even more connections with other public agencies.	New routes in and access to communities, leading to improved connections and communication with residents.	Leveraged funding and investment in local people, their skills and employment, health and wellbeing and positive ways to address crime and anti-social behaviour.
Opportunities to have a seat at the strategy table and be part of local decision-making.	Increased knowledge about the local area and its residents, and somewhere to go to when they need additional information.	Putting a human face to regeneration, which in turn gives local people a greater sense of civic pride and ownership over large scale development projects and change.

Introductions and new connections in the public and voluntary sectors.	Ability to make their services and funding reach further and better because of being able to work through the Big Local area or co-locate (share or collaborate on) services with them.	Local assets, especially community centres, located within the hyperlocal area.
Practical help and support with area improvement plans and projects.	Ability to work in a more inclusive way.	Support for these to be community-led and more generally, for these and other services and places to become inclusive and accessible.

Key messages

From the research, we have identified key messages about relationships between communities and local authorities, housing associations, schools and health agencies.

Local authorities

Having a relationship with the local authority is essential.

Local authorities, including councillors, will find there is a need for multiple relationships between the community and different departments and layers in the hierarchy.

Accepting that there is history on both sides and finding where working together is in fact possible may be more effective than either ignoring historical disagreements or attempting to unpick them.

Funding cuts may have dismantled local authority capacity for community engagement, but by joining up with Big Local partnerships (or other local community groups and organisations), new routes into the community can be established.

Housing associations

Housing association relationships, while less common, can be powerfully supportive.

Housing associations can be a powerfully strong ally in a community, provided that their governance and leadership see the value of working with the whole community and not just their own tenants.

Housing associations can add value to community work in many ways, from helping with the acquisition, development or running of a community hub to co-locating their community investment activities, such as employment and training, health and wellbeing, and support for young people.

Schools

School connections tend to be ad hoc, except where there is some means of ongoing dialogue.

Through ongoing dialogue with local residents, schools have gained new insights into the community around them and have been able to pursue projects that they could not have carried out alone.

This dialogue has been managed through the Big Local partnership, but in other communities it could be achieved through other local groups. Through this kind of collaboration, schools and communities come to understand one another's priorities and can see the potential of working together.

Reaching this level of understanding can take time – something that some stretched schools currently lack.

One effective, practical way to build this understanding is through a member of the Big Local partnership sitting on a school's governing board, and vice versa. Finding ways to open up governance structures between schools and communities in this way can be beneficial to both parties.

However, some schools and Big Local partnerships have been content with an ad hoc relationship that pops up around one-off events or activities, and find this pragmatic and useful. For some schools and communities, starting with a one-off opportunity or invitation to work together or get involved might be a realistic and productive way to build a closer relationship.

Health agencies

Building relationships with health agencies can be challenging for communities – just finding a way to start a conversation often counts as significant progress.

Health agencies can be difficult for communities to understand. Finding ways to demystify processes, governance and other structures can be helpful.

Communities and health agencies getting together to understand the way one another works, and the kinds of health and wellbeing issues that are being prioritised on both sides, can also help.

Key for health agencies is to understand the health and wellbeing work that communities are delivering outside the NHS and public health context, and to work out how their own public-sector work can usefully fit together with that of the community.

1. Introduction

This report will be of interest to public agencies and communities who want to achieve lasting change and recognise that they are more likely to be successful in this if they work together. It sits within a wider context of growing policy emphasis on public involvement in local decision-making, and broader policy and good-practice around closer working between communities and public agencies.

Policy and good practice around communities and public agencies working together

Local authorities: The [Local Government Act 1999](#) places a duty on councils to continuously improve and requires that they consult with people who are likely to use services or have an interest in the area. The [Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill 2007](#) develops this requirement and places a 'duty to involve' upon all authorities from April 2009.

Housing associations: Community investment is the work that housing providers undertake with communities, which is in addition to their responsibilities for providing housing and is intended to help those communities thrive. This is explained and defined by the [Centre for Excellence in Community Investment](#).

Schools: The Ofsted [Education Inspection Framework](#) includes a requirement that "leaders engage effectively with learners and others in their community, including – where relevant – parents, carers, employers and local services".

Health agencies: There is a legal duty to involve patients and the public in commissioning health services. This is known as the 'duty to involve' and is set out in [statutory guidance for CCGs and NHS England](#).

How this plays out in different communities and public agencies varies significantly. This research is about what can be learned from the rich variety of on-the-ground experience of residents in Big Local areas and the public agencies they have worked with.

1.1 Background

The success of Big Local areas in achieving the priorities they have chosen to work on is to some extent dependent on them having good relationships with other groups, organisations and institutions operating in their locality. Previous research commissioned by Local Trust (Nicol and Raven, 2020; McCabe et al., 2019; Baker et al., 2016) has shown that public agencies – especially local authorities, health agencies and housing associations – can play a significant role in Big Local areas being able to make things happen.

Research has also shown that to understand relationships between communities and public agencies there is a need to explore the wider environment in which they take place and the contextual factors that affect them. As Big Local areas move towards thinking about the future and their legacy beyond the Big Local programme, which comes to an end in 2026, these relationships are expected to become even more important.

1.2 Purpose

Local Trust commissioned this research to understand relationships between Big Local areas and the four most common types of public agencies (Local Trust, 2021) they were connecting with: these were **local authorities, housing associations, schools** and **health agencies**.

Local Trust was interested in understanding the nature, quality and outcome of these relationships, and how they can best work together to achieve the lasting and sustainable change that Big Local areas want to see. They wanted 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. The four types of agency are defined below.

- A **local authority** is responsible for many of the public services and facilities in a particular area. It is a universal term to describe unitary, district and county, parish councils as well as park authorities.
- **Housing associations**, also called registered social landlords (RSLs), offer similar types of housing as local councils, often to people on a low income or who need extra support.
- **Schools** deliver teaching at primary and secondary level. Some Big Local partnerships have also developed relationships with their local Further Education colleges.
- **Health agencies** includes an area's Primary Care Network (GP practices working together with community, mental health, social care, pharmacy, and hospital and voluntary services in their local areas); Clinical Commissioning Group (a clinically led group that includes all the GP groups in a geographical area and has responsibility for organising the delivery of NHS services), and GP surgeries.

Specifically, the research addressed four questions:

1. To what extent are Big Local areas developing relationships with public agencies?
2. What are the outcomes of these relationships?
3. To what extent are these relationships effective?
4. How can communities best work together now and in the future?

1.3 Approach and methods

The research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically between June and October 2021. At that time, Big Local areas were in the process of resuming some in-person meetings and activities, as well as experimenting with hybrid ways of working together. All adults had been offered a vaccine and schools had reopened. People working and volunteering in communities as well as health agencies described feeling exhausted (at least one Big Local and its rep formally closed its doors for the whole of August).

There were three phases to the research:

- Phase one: Scoping interviews including other Big Local areas and public agencies, desk review of 48 reports, and analysis of Big Local survey data.
- Phase two: In-depth fieldwork in 10 Big Local areas with people in communities and public agencies.

- Phase three: Analysis, including a workshop with Local Trust and the Big Local Policy and Advocacy Panel, a forum created in January 2020 for Big Local areas to be involved in shaping Local Trust's policy and advocacy work.

The fieldwork was carried out in 10 Big Local areas. The main criteria for inclusion had to be areas' capacity and willingness to take part in the research, because the timing of the project during the pandemic ruled this out for a great number of Big Local areas. After this consideration, the focus was on identifying areas with a range of relationships with the four types of public agency for us to learn from, and achieving the best possible coverage across the England regions.

Participating areas and agencies have been anonymised. They are located across six regions (two in each of Yorkshire & Humber, South East and North West regions, and one each in East Midlands, East of England, South West and London). They are mostly urban, with two coastal communities included in the sample.

The fieldwork in these 10 areas engaged 38 people working in public agencies and 65 people in communities. Many of these individuals engaged with the research more than once, and some held more than one relevant role (for example, a Big Local worker seconded by a housing association).

A range of methods were used, including:

- semi-structured in-depth interviews with Big Local partnerships, reps and public agencies
- participatory mapping workshops with Big Local partnerships and their partners
- facilitated conversations between Big Local partnerships and public agencies
- and additional calls and conversations with Big Local partnerships, reps and workers.

The report findings are laid out in three parts, reflecting the research questions. The conclusion brings together the findings and puts forward some key messages for people in communities and public agencies. The appendix contains four case studies of relationships between Big Local areas and each of the four types of public agency that this research has focused on.

The research team developed and shared with participants a set of principles specifically for this project. These build on and reflect Big Local principles, requiring that research is carried out "sensitively and empathetically with Big Local areas, and that the Big Local partnerships who participate in the research benefit from it"; and that it is guided by the Big Local ethos and values of being resident-led and going at the pace of the Big Local area.

The principles that the research team developed and shared with Big Local areas were:

- We will listen to the people who choose to take part, and do not just expect them to fit in with our plans.
- The way we work is grounded in a desire to support communities, and for Local Trust to understand their context better.
- We hope to make the research an enjoyable experience that leaves behind learning that will help achieve the change you [the community] want to see.

2. What relationships exist and why?

Summary of key findings

The majority of all 150 Big Local areas have partnerships with public agencies, most commonly with local authorities, followed by public agencies in education, housing and health.

The purpose of these relationships fell under six categories: funding, asset and infrastructure, co-design and co-delivery, sharing and networking, routes into community or public agency, and informal support and guidance.

These relationships require time and energy. They could come and go, affected by changes in public agency structures or personnel, or the energy and capacity of the individuals involved.

Having an awareness of the types of relationship that exist appeared helpful, and three broad types emerged:

- **Powerful allies** who are supportive of the Big Local area and have the power to turn ideas into action.
- **Friends and acquaintances** who have good relationships with the Big Local area and can be called upon for support when needed.
- **Clients and contractors** with whom the Big Local area has contractual arrangements to carry out work.

This section looks at the extent of relationships in four ways: what relationships exist, why they exist, who specifically holds the relationship, and how close they are. The findings below are drawn from a programme-wide survey of Big Local reps in Quarter 1 2021 (the 'reps survey'); and from qualitative data collected in the 10 Big Local areas that took part in the fieldwork.

The findings build on previous research commissioned by Local Trust and wider literature (for example, Pollard et al., 2021). These indicate that the extent of relationships is shaped by context, which in turn affects what triggers these relationships and what it takes to make them happen, as well as the strength and intensity of the relationships and their outcomes. More specifically, the evidence suggests the relationships vary according to a range of internal and external factors. These are:

- the Big Local partnership itself – particularly who is involved and makes decisions, their skills and capacity, and group dynamics
- the area profile, including in terms of the local economy, employment, housing stock and transfer, and previous community development initiatives
- the social infrastructure that supports social relationships and networks locally, such as community hubs, green spaces and digital platforms
- the institutional context in which local agencies operate, for instance the political makeup of local councils, the local markets including housing and the mixed economy of healthcare services, spending budgets, commissioning processes, and organisational structures

- the wider context at national level and beyond, such as government policies and the COVID-19 pandemic.

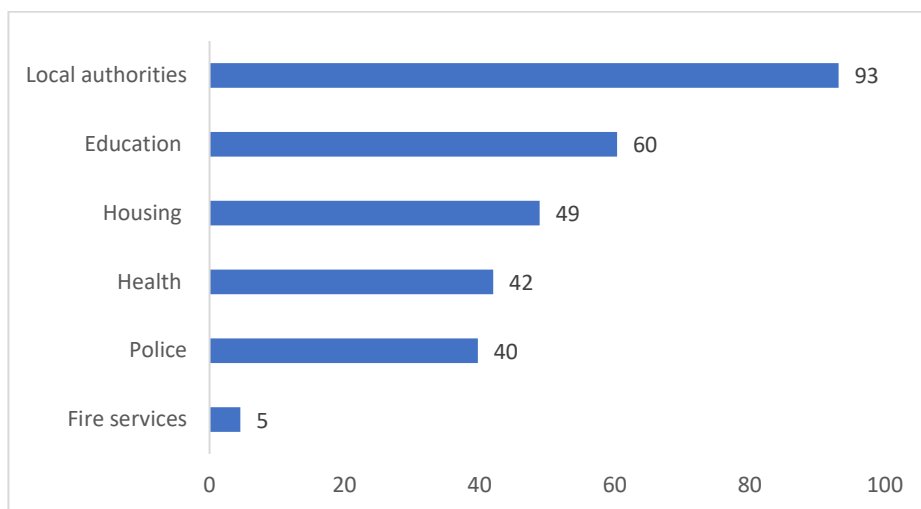
In addition to these factors, the evidence highlights the way relationships are embedded in history and memory. Local community activism usually predates Big Local, and the residents’ experiences of past local campaigns and initiatives, whether successful or not, may partly explain present relationships with public agencies. Section three provides more information on how the relationships with public agencies are developed and what makes them work.

2.1 Which public agencies do Big Local partnerships have relationships with?

The programme-wide Big Local ‘reps survey’ (Quarter 1 2021) suggests that most Big Local areas currently have relationships with public agencies. Only four out of the 135 Big Local areas that responded to the survey were said to have no current relationships with any public agency.

Local authorities are the public agencies that Big Local areas are the most likely to have relationships with, followed by those in education, housing and health. Almost a third of Big Local areas have relationships with the police – a similar proportion to health agencies.

Figure 1: Types of public agency that Big Local areas have relationships with (%) n=131



Source: Survey of Big Local reps in Quarter 1, 2021

The figures from the Big Local reps survey also show that building and maintaining relationships is an important element of the Big Local areas’ work and this was confirmed in the fieldwork. As in previous research (McCabe et al., 2018), the fieldwork carried out for this research report highlighted that the state of Big Local areas’ relationships with public agencies is diverse and varies in quality and intensity from one area to the other and from one public agency to the other. Big Local areas hold relationships with a range of public agencies simultaneously, but they also hold relationships with other local stakeholders such as community groups, charities and businesses that are all part of the wider ecosystem.

Research on community responses to the pandemic showed how important the local ecosystem is, with local efforts particularly successful where good relationships between Big Local areas, voluntary and community organisations and public agencies existed and where there was a history of working well together (McCabe et al., 2020).

Local authority departments and elected councillors: These relationships are critical to achieving sustained change. Communities may have a mixture of positive and difficult relationships with different departments and councillors, who themselves don't always work in a joined-up way. Many Big Local partnerships operate in areas with multiple layers of local government (for instance, areas where parish councils exist), and this makes things significantly more complex and difficult to navigate.

Examples on the ground

- In one of the Big Local areas, the relationship is long-standing and based on a small number of officers who understand the ethos of Big Local and are willing to champion its work. Contact with councillors is distant and it has been difficult to find an ally among these elected representatives similarly willing to spend time engaging with Big Local in order to understand what the partnership can offer.
- In another Big Local area, there is a strong relationship with the parish council, but the direction of effort is perceived to be one way and very much about the Big Local partnership making all the effort to engage with, understand and work within parish processes.

Housing associations: Links with housing associations are less common than with local authorities, but where they work well these are helpful connections to have in terms of influence and advocacy. There are some great examples of joint work and cooperation between communities and housing association community investment teams¹. A critical factor is whether or not the housing association perceives an interest in the area in general, and not just its own properties and tenants.

Examples on the ground

- In one Big Local area, the local housing association is also the locally trusted organisation (LTO) for the Big Local partnership. LTOs hold Big Local funds and provide services that only an incorporated body can (such as insurance and employment and so on). This housing association offers advice and is very supportive, especially in the Big Local area's relationship with elected representatives.
- In another area, the existing relationship with one of the local housing associations is supportive and collaborative, but even with such a positive relationship, changes in personnel have created challenges and made joint work more complicated due to a lack of continuity in relationships and shared ways of working together.

Schools: Where they exist, these relationships are good. They are often ad hoc and focused on one-off projects or events. As such, the relationship may come and go over time. Where there is a long-term, more stable relationship, there appears to be more awareness on both sides of common goals. A Big Local partnership can have strong relationships with one school in the area, but none or very few with others.

¹ Community investment has been defined by HACT as '[the work social housing organisations do alongside people and communities to help them thrive](#)' (Centre for Excellence in Community Investment, 2020)

Examples on the ground

- One Big Local partnership agreed a long-term maintenance contract for a community facility on the land leased to the school on a peppercorn rent from the council.
- Another partnered with the local college to develop a community café, supporting learning and families with children with autism.

Health agencies: These relationships are often about getting started locally and finding ways to understand health structures (sometimes through being in touch with national networks). Despite health being a major theme for Big Local areas (often around preventative health care) and frequently included in their plans, they are not always working on this with public health agencies, but rather trying or aspiring to do so. They may be working with another public agency or a local charity. Where they are working with public health agencies, these include GP practices, healthy-living teams and Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs).

Examples on the ground

- In one area, the Big Local partnership had a good relationship with a public sector healthy-living team, but following a restructure, contact ceased and the community lost touch with a key individual that had championed their work.
- In another area, the Big Local partnership runs a volunteer-led service in collaboration with the local GP surgery providing residents with support for health and wellbeing, housing, work, financial or family problems.

2.2 What is the purpose of relationships with public agencies?

What a relationship between a Big Local and public agency looks like – the frequency of contact, the strength of the connection – is partly linked to the purpose it serves, which is largely related to the Big Local area's plans, the priorities the areas have set themselves and what outcomes they wish to achieve.

From the reps survey we identified six main reasons for these relationships. Ranked in order of frequency of mention in the survey, the reasons were:

- **Co-design and co-delivery** (for example, developing or delivering projects, activities or services in partnership/collaboration).
- **Sharing and networking** (for example, participating in networks and forums with public agencies; promoting and sharing information about respective projects, activities and services).
- **Informal support and guidance**
- **Routes into the community for public agencies and vice versa** (for example, consulting and gathering community feedback on public sector projects, activities or services; providing routes into the community, and a trusted platform for the public agency; providing routes into the public agency for community members).

- **Assets and infrastructure** (for example, developing or acquiring assets from the public agency; working on large development/infrastructure projects with the public agency).
- **Funding** (for example, receiving funding from the public agency to deliver projects, activities or services; funding the public agency to deliver projects, activities or services).

Participants in the 10 Big Local areas that took part in the fieldwork talked about getting involved in complex projects that required them to work with several public agencies. This had led Big Local areas to understand their own role in the wider ecosystem of voluntary and public agencies locally, and to see how building relationships with public agencies could help them to achieve their own aims.

“In the early days we had lots of ideas. It’s gradually dawning that we have to work with public agencies because they have the power and they are allowed to do things. As a group of volunteers we’re not allowed. So we’re forced to work with them to get things done”. (Big Local partnership)

Examples on the ground

- A Big Local area had become part of a multi-agency effort to address drug use and drug-related crime among young people locally. In doing so it had been able to build connections between the school, with which it already had a good relationship, and the police force, with which it (and the wider community) did not.
- A Big Local partnership decided to fund the initial capital outlay to pay for a sports area and the council agreed to take responsibility for its ongoing maintenance.
- A multi-agency collaboration between a Big Local partnership, local council, and police force led to the creation of a large community leisure space comprising a playing field, play area, and skateboard park. After opening this facility, antisocial behaviour was reduced by 35 per cent and has stayed at the new level ever since.

At the other end of the spectrum, the fieldwork highlighted that some relationships that focus on the sharing of information and networking are based on occasional, casual or light-touch interactions. These relationships primarily help Big Local areas to promote their activities to public agencies, gain support, and cultivate existing connections while building new ones. Perhaps to a lesser extent, they also help Big Local areas get insights, tap into informal support or guidance, and see how they fit into the bigger picture.

These relationships can be piecemeal, but they are still very useful. If they are in line with the community’s own plans and priorities they can grow over time and lead to something more significant that involves greater collaboration.

For public agencies, the relationship with a Big Local area can be a route into the community that can help them understand what residents think of a service or want from an initiative. Providing these routes into the community can strengthen the impact of Big Local areas for residents when it gives them opportunities to get their voices heard and to shape future decisions. If community engagement is underpinned by common values

shared by the Big Local areas and public agencies, consultations and occasions to get community feedback benefit both parties.

Examples on the ground

- One Big Local partnership worked with the local authority to rewrite a community survey so that it addressed issues the community wanted to focus on and used accessible language. They successfully demonstrated that the local authority's initial approach to consultation had been rushed and carried out by people who lacked the local knowledge to yield a good response rate. The response rate for the revised survey was considerably higher than the local authority usually experiences. The local authority welcomed the Big Local partnership designing and administering a subsequent survey (although it took about a year for them to be formally commissioned to do so).

Relationships around the funding of activities and services can also work both ways – they can be about receiving funding from public agencies as well as supporting their work. Participants in both Big Local communities and their public agency partners commented that having the Big Local pot of money had changed the dynamics of some of the relationships and contributed, in some cases, to addressing existing power imbalances.

“The budget contribution helps get things done more quickly and residents see the difference. The match funding makes it unique.” (Local authority)

2.3 Who holds the relationships with public agencies?

The Big Local worker plays a key role in building and maintaining relationships. From the Big Local reps survey, we learned that where there are two or more people holding these relationships, the worker was mentioned the most (99 times) followed by the chair (90 times) and other resident partnership members (73 times). Also involved were LTOs (50 times), non-resident partnership members (23 times) and reps (10 times). Mainly relationships were held by more than one person.

The fieldwork findings backed this up, and confirmed that the roles of the worker and chair are generally central to relationships, but that it is also common for there to be a range of people with responsibility over different relationships. This depends on the purpose of the relationship and the complexity and scale of the projects, and what specific knowledge and expertise is required (Lyon et al., 2021). In some cases, this leads to the involvement of non-resident partnership members (for example, local councillors) or professionals with specialist skills. People's involvement and roles are also shaped by personal experience, connections, interests and passions. The potential for conflicts of interest to arise was raised by some participants; for example, where a partnership member is also a tenant of the housing association, LTO, or is also a council employee. The extent to which arrangements were in place to manage this varied.

Participants talked about the time and energy that establishing and maintaining new and changing relationships requires, and how sharing the workload makes it more manageable. In some areas, everyone in the partnership is involved to some extent, but this means continually ensuring that others are kept informed and that there are opportunities to feed back. Given that the purpose and focus of these relationships can be large – such as acquiring assets and developing programmes together – the workers' input is helpful in

providing the consistency and greater coordination required by collaborative projects. We revisit the significance of paid capacity for what can be achieved in section 4.

2.4 How closely do Big Local areas and public agencies work together?

Looking at how relationships have changed over time can help put things into perspective and show how a mix of formal and informal opportunities for connection can strengthen relationships and outcomes going forward.

Over the years, some participants have developed strong personal relationships with officers and councillors. They also highlighted how fragile these informal and/or personal relationships could be, with people moving jobs and changes in administration and organisational restructures. They recognised how risky this can be for the future. Previous research (Baker et al., 2016) has shown that it is not uncommon for communities to have to navigate finding allies who are prepared to work with them, building connections based on trust and understanding, and ensuring that relationships are sustainable in the longer term.

The Big Local areas that took part in the research were offered the opportunity to have an independently facilitated conversation with one of their public agency partners. One Big Local area that took part with their local authority partners identified a number of actions that they hoped might help their relationship to be more strategic and stable. By widening the relationship, both parties believed they might secure it for the long term. This included holding regular meetings that connect even more officers to the Big Local community, and vice versa; starting to plan now for what happens to the places held on strategic boards once the Big Local programme ceases to exist; and raising awareness of what has been the added value of working with Big Local.

“This is where it comes back to have understanding how [Big Local] hits outcomes like health etc; some elected reps don’t understand what [Big Local] is about; and moving [Big Local] under a portfolio holder; if you have an exhibition, do an evening for elected members” . (Local authority)

In another Big Local area that also met with the local authority for an independently facilitated conversation, participants discussed having lost the relationship in the past and having learned the lessons from this, as this extract from their meeting summary illustrates:

“Having a point of contact helps, [Big Local area] have experienced losing that in a restructure for example, showed how much that matters. Is it about the relationship with [the Big Local area] and the public agency even? Or is it the person? Now there is more than one person to connect to, and a handover happens if someone is going to be away. And with the practical work – it’s rarely a one-person job so it has to be a team approach. [Big Local area] are like a part of our team” . (Local authority)

In this way, this and other Big Local areas might be able to resist or mitigate the fragility of some relationships, as highlighted in a briefing on community responses to COVID-19. In this, the authors wrote about the “ebb and flow of collaborative working between communities and councils [that] can pass rapidly through repeated cycles of retreat and

advance” (Wilson et al., 2021). In the interviews and workshops, it became apparent that this “see-saw” effect relates to any relationships (not just those with local authorities), and not only during the pandemic.

Whether Big Local areas choose to cultivate and sustain their relationships with public agencies depends on context, objectives and resources, but also on the type of relationship. The fieldwork brought to the fore three main types of relationship that Big Local areas had to consider in order to assess strategically how much to invest and how to proceed:

- **Powerful allies** who are supportive of the Big Local area and have the power to turn ideas into action, whether because they possess the resources, capacity or authority to do so. An example might be the housing association community investment manager who has been on the patch for years and whose team will continue to work there after the Big Local programme has come to an end.
- **Friends and acquaintances** who have a good relationship with the Big Local area and can be called upon for support when needed. Examples might include schools that get involved occasionally in one-off events or training, and other education providers who promote opportunities through Big Local.
- **Clients and contractors** with whom the Big Local area has a contractual arrangement to carry out work. This could include council officers or health providers who commission the Big Local to deliver a service or an activity.

3. What makes relationships work?

Summary of key findings

- Big Local areas identified eight criteria for effective relationships, covering: mutual knowledge; understanding; trust; respect; common language; shared goals; defined roles but willingness to be flexible; and the capacity and resources to follow through with agreed actions and decisions.
- Whether a Big Local partnership knows its own power and how to use it was also critical to the effectiveness of their relationships.
- Having the paid capacity of a community or development worker who could help maintain momentum was identified as a key ingredient in building relationships between communities and public agencies.

The previous section described the **extent** of relationships between Big Local areas and public agencies. This section looks at **whether those relationships are effective** and the **key factors for effectiveness**.

Participation of communities in shaping service delivery and holding service providers to account has been connected to public sector reform. However, cuts to public spending and procurement processes have considerably limited the scope of progress (Lent and Studdert, 2021). Recent research has suggested that while the pandemic may have resulted in an increase in community involvement and collaboration across sector boundaries, growing pressures are likely to influence whether they are able to work together effectively in the future (Cook et al., 2020).

Research has also shown that public agencies' capacity to engage with communities and Big Local partnerships also depends on who else is operating in their sector (Nicol and Raven, 2020). For instance, the power and resources held by the private sector in housing development impacts significantly on what gets built in an area and who is included in decision-making.

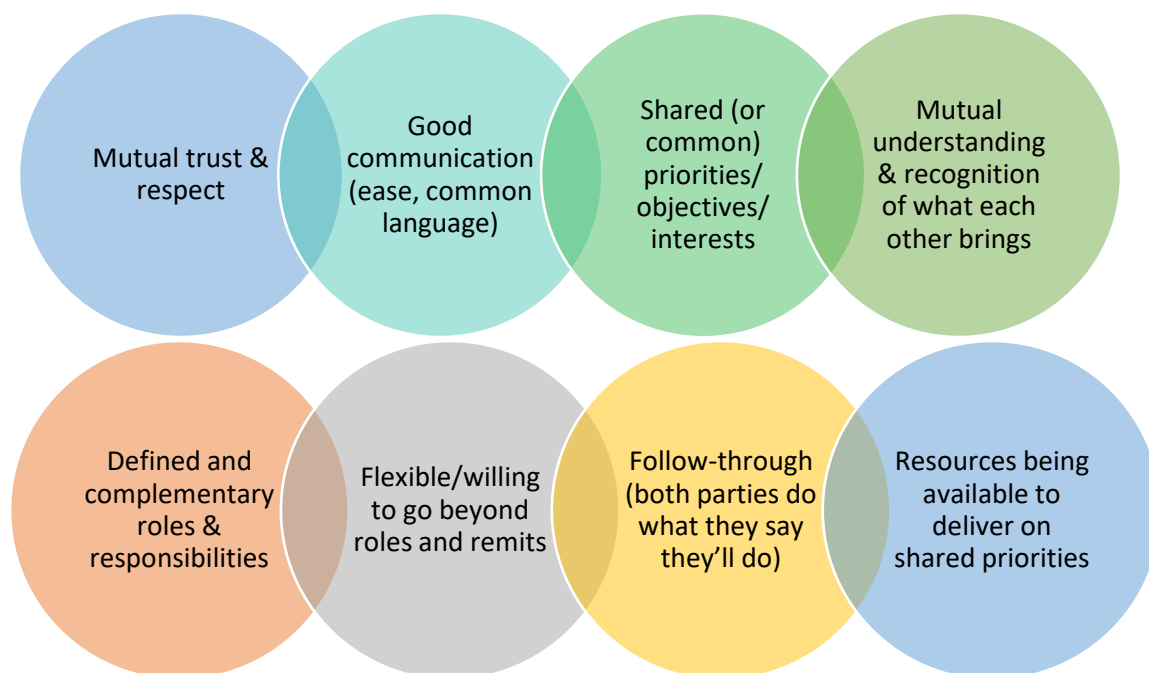
Likewise, the mixed health economy – which has seen the emergence of hybrid organisations such as Community Interest Companies (CICs) that are part of the publicly funded NHS – is shaping how health agencies are working with communities. The way public agencies are organised and managed internally impacts on their capacity to engage. Leadership within public agencies can determine what the power dynamics are, the way strategic decisions are made and whether community engagement is prioritised or not (Lent and Studdert, 2021).

3.1 What makes for an effective relationship?

During the relationship-mapping workshops that were held in each Big Local area, participants selected what for them were the most important criteria for an effective relationship. There was common ground in responses from across the areas, with the choices largely lining up with Local Trust's research (Tjoa, 2018; Terry, 2020) and wider literature on partnership working, especially regarding public service delivery and the voluntary and community sector (Lent and Studdert, 2021; Young and Goodall, 2021).

Although the areas did not specifically call out consistency (a criteria that does feature in the literature) they did talk about the effects of changes in personnel, restructures or what they characterised as a 'revolving door' of different people coming to meetings.

Figure 2: Big Local areas' most important criteria for an effective relationship



Some participants described how the criteria interact in relationships between Big Local areas and public agencies; for example, that good communication can help build trust and respect, or a lack of (public sector) resources can limit follow-through, even where there is great potential and shared interest.

3.2 Key factors affecting relationships with public agencies

Previous research has identified a range of factors affecting relationships with public agencies, including:

- a lack of knowledge and mutual understanding (Big Local areas and public agencies not knowing enough about each other, why decisions are made and by whom, and the pressures they face)
- the time and capacity required to build lasting relationships based on trust clashing with the processes and procedures of public agencies
- the perception that Big Local partnerships lack legitimacy because of their hyperlocal nature
- the complexity of the eco-system in which they operate (the range of stakeholders and the power dynamics among them) (Baker et al, 2016; McCabe et al, 2018; Lyon et al, 2021).

The fieldwork for this research identified the following factors that may either help or hold back relationships. These largely echo the findings of previous research.

- **Having independent (Big Local) funding:** Funding gives areas leverage and negotiating power, so long as Big Local is not perceived as being solely about the funds. The research found examples of Big Local areas having the confidence to resist council requests to fund some projects and negotiating to jointly fund others. These Big Local partnerships, unlike other voluntary and community bodies, are not asking for funding. Big Local partnerships have their own resources, so relationships are not always predicated on financial transactions.

- **Public agencies feeling the pinch:** Public sector funding cuts have already led to the loss of or severe reduction in teams with the skills and capacity for community engagement, which affects their ability to follow through on ideas that have a lot of potential but need resourcing. This was especially the case in councils but was also affecting housing associations' community investment work. Participants said this work was more project-oriented, with an emphasis on projects that will support tenancy sustainment.
- **Having both the skills and the structures for community engagement:** Council officers acknowledged their responsibility to make room for communities to be part of conversations about policy and strategy. Even with the will, the infrastructure of local authorities and health agencies often does not line up with how communities approach issues – for example, a housing association separating their tenant services and regeneration work. These mismatches can limit the potential for communities to work with public agencies and can also reinforce the perception in public agencies of resident-led groups being unskilled, or lacking understanding. This in turn affects the power balance in and outcomes of relationships between Big Local areas and public agencies.

“Things would have been very different without the [Big Local-led forum] – we’d have gone along without any meaningful input from local people, who have a say in this. We at the council are costly, not flexible, and don’t know communities that well. What we can do is facilitate and enable. It’s so much more cost-effective and more importantly more effective to work with communities. We are here to support and deliver. What made it really effective was setting out where we want to get to and sharing objectives. It’s all about taking action and building trust together”. (Local authority)

Examples on the ground

- One Big Local partnership has set up a forum for community discussions and input into a regeneration scheme – and invited the council to sit round that table. This feels like a powerful opportunity for the community representatives led by the Big Local partnership to set the agenda and create a more equal footing for a discussion: as one resident put it, *“If you’re not at the table, you’re on the menu”*.

Managing disagreement: The process of building a relationship with a community takes time and is dependent on community engagement skills. Where they were present, this combination often meant that the public agency was more comfortable with disagreement and debate. One local authority department, which had overcome a difficult historical relationship, said: “We engage with objectors to understand [them]. Objection is something we fully expect to happen. The Big Local has been on side, [but] they also have their own funding and objectives”.

Ability to ‘speak the language’ of health or education: Big Local areas that have gained confidence in the language associated with health or education are more able to make the case for why these public agencies should work with them, to explain how their plans and priorities align with those of the public agency, and to articulate common goals. This often comes from the experience of Big Local staff or partnership members having held public agency roles. This ability is important in shifting a relationship towards being more strategic; being able to understand the priorities or strategic direction of a public agency

and come together to discuss the shared need and will to contribute to achieving that. Particularly in relation to health, being able to show how Big Local-supported community activity is feeding into the wider determinants in an area, approaching a health agency with a clear picture of how they can help them.

Examples on the ground

- A partnership chair and local resident explained how he has been supporting community members to understand the language of the health system in order to help them get what they need and navigate their way through, for example, an appointment system.
- A local authority and community that had previously had a tense and difficult relationship had begun to work well together. This was in part due to initially having one person on the Big Local partnership who could speak the language of the council highways department. This had helped build trust and understanding – as the local authority put it: “We speak the same language – we have good rapport and collaborative approach ... when we work with [Big Local partnership] there are people who get it – we don’t need to explain”.

Understanding the system: It can be hard to understand who does what within public agencies, and this is compounded by frequent restructuring, secondments and the loss or drastic reduction in community engagement posts and teams. All the Big Local areas that took part in the research and the public agencies they work with had been affected by one or more of these factors. The box below offers some examples from the fieldwork about how Big Local partnerships have sought to address this.

Examples on the ground

- One Big local area councillor acknowledged that it was hard for Big Local partnership members to understand the different roles and remits of councillors and officers, which negatively impacted the effectiveness of their communications and influence.
- In another of the areas we worked with, the partnership, led by the chair and workers, generally make a significant effort to maintain relationships with institutions and the people who work in them. As soon as a councillor or officer moves on they arrange a walk-about with the new post-holder. This helps them keep contact and positive relationships – particularly with the council, who are a key ally.

Local presence and ‘footprint’: Schools and housing associations have properties and assets in Big Local areas, as well as connections with people who live there, including pupils, parents and tenants. Housing associations understand the geography of the area and have a stake in the community’s success (at the very least in terms of tenancy sustainment and property maintenance). Conversely, where public agencies – typically health and local authorities – don’t know the area, Big Local areas tend to become the go-to for local insight and connections.

Examples on the ground

- A school had a history of working with a local residents' association. When that folded, they joined up with the Big Local partnership instead, because they wanted to continue to have a local community group to work with.
- A housing association and a Big Local partnership with mutual interest in work around training and employment for young people and people whose work had been affected by the pandemic were pleased to be able to co-locate a range of support, including job fairs and other local opportunities.

Being able to see the results of working together: Achieving shared outcomes together builds conviction in the ongoing value of building a relationship, with both parties recognising what the other brings. It is important for both parties to see their contribution being acknowledged, sometimes in marketing and branding. This in turn enables Big Local partnerships to **gain confidence and know their power in the relationship** (see section 3.3).

Keeping relationships going: Big Local areas used a range of strategies to keep public agency contacts fresh, including extending invitations to visit the partnership or attend events and walkabouts.

3.3 Big Local partnerships and power

When Big Local partnerships realise and use their power it makes a critical difference to the effectiveness and quality of the relationships they form. Participants described four features of Big Local partnerships that understand their own power:

- **Confidence:** Big Local areas said they feel more confident in their relationships. This has resulted in changes in behaviours, such as having the confidence to say 'no' to partners about opportunities or requests in order to manage their capacity or stay focused on their priorities; and seeing themselves as helping set the agenda for change. In some areas this had extended to feeling more confident to manage conflicts of interest that interfered with their relationships with public agencies, typically where a partnership member was a public agency employee or councillor.
- **Skills:** Participants in Big Local areas noted skills they have acquired (or discovered they already possessed) that have helped them work effectively with public agencies – especially around language. One Big Local partnership commented: "We have a lot of power and quite a lot of influence, but we have to be diplomatic and negotiate. These aren't cuddly relationships". There were varying levels of awareness among some local authorities that they were more inclined to work with communities able to communicate on their terms. As one Big Local chair put it: "[I realise I] have become a small-p politician – knowing how to play the game and work with the system to get results for the community."
- **Evidence and experience:** Having the skills and confidence described above has made Big Local areas feel "not afraid to bring our lived experience in the room". They have found that lived experience can be a powerful driver for change, especially when combined with wider evidence, whether published or collected by the partnership.
- **Support and paid capacity:** For a partnership to realise its power, it needs support. Having the support and capacity of an effective community or development worker was critical to successful relationships for some partnerships.

Examples on the ground

- In one area, it had been very powerful having someone who had been directly affected by the council's decisions about a housing development involved in the Big Local partnership. This had helped draw attention to the way people living there were experiencing the council's decisions and attitudes. By then going a step further and gathering evidence from other people living there – by knocking on doors and asking – they were able to provide the council with both evidence and experience to support their case. Having a paid worker who could do some of the door-knocking and help maintain momentum had been important.

4. What are the outcomes of these relationships?

Summary of key findings

- Relationships between communities and public agencies had achieved positive outcomes for the Big Local partnership, the public agency and the wider community. These outcomes are set out separately, although they do interact (for example, an increase in civic pride helps a local authority engage communities).
- Big Local partnership outcomes:
 - Profile, visibility and a positive reputation, which helped them to build even more connections with other public agencies.
 - Opportunities to have a seat at the strategy table and be part of local decision-making.
 - Introductions and new connections in the public and voluntary sectors.
 - Practical help and support with area improvement plans and projects.
- Public agency outcomes:
 - New routes into and access to communities, leading to improved connections and communication with residents.
 - Increased knowledge about the local area and its residents, and a new source of additional information when needed.
 - Ability to make their services and funding reach further and better because of being able to work through the Big Local area or co-locate services with them.
 - Ability to work in a more inclusive way.
- Big Local area outcomes:
 - Leveraged funding and investment in local people, their skills and employment, health and wellbeing and positive ways to address crime and anti-social behaviour.
 - Putting a human face to regeneration, in turn giving local people a greater sense of civic pride and ownership over large-scale development projects and change.
 - Local assets (especially community centres) located within the hyperlocal area, and support for these to be community-led – and more generally, for these and other services and places to become inclusive and accessible.
- Political apathy (especially from elected councillors), hostility or tensions can undermine and jeopardise all of the benefits and achievements described above.

This section looks at the outcomes of relationships with public agencies by type of public agency. It draws on all the fieldwork interviews and conversations, including the visual mapping and learning about the wider context in which relationships were formed. This learning builds on previous research that shows how the wider context and history of an area can affect their ability to work in partnership with public agencies.

4.1 Local authorities

Through closer working relationships with local authorities, some Big Local partnerships said that they have gained profile and visibility, and that this has led to being heard, invited onto committees, and building a reputation as a positive and useful voice to have at the table. Developing skills and confidence through Big Local support helped them achieve these outcomes, but it was the experience of being involved that enabled them to understand their power – and in doing so become even stronger.

Local authorities that had formed a relationship with a Big Local area said that they (and in one case their contractors) had developed a better connection with residents and knowledge of the Big Local area, and that this was helping them take a more inclusive approach to their work there. Big Local partnerships offering to walk the area with officers (and councillors) had been an effective way for these authorities to mitigate their lack of familiarity with or presence in the area.

Participants identified the following outcomes:

- **Civic pride:** Big Local areas being involved in and working with local authorities on activities promoting public art and heritage, community activities and social infrastructure (such as creating or breathing new life into community centres) have helped promote a sense of pride in the area. Some agencies said that they felt this had helped address and reduce incidence of anti-social behaviour.
- **Funding:** By working together, Big Local areas and public agencies have been able to leverage more funding into the area and/or pursue joint funding bids.
- **Reach:** Local authority funding (particularly grants to community groups) is more effective because Big Local areas know how to promote it and encourage and support applications. Big Local areas highlight how the distribution of small grants can be a way for community members to get together and develop ideas and projects. One local authority councillor said: "A lot of our grants have been able to be channelled much better with the support from [name] Big Local".
- **Human face:** Big Local areas have ensured that regeneration and housing supply have a human face; that they are about creating homes rather than just houses, and are reflective of local need rather than just developer interests. This has led to residents' views and opinions being taken into account in decisions affecting regeneration in their area, and to the local authority beginning to proactively seek their advice as new issues and questions around regeneration arise.
- **Seat at the strategy table:** This means being involved in strategic conversations about issues beyond the hyperlocal area. In order to be at the table for local authority strategy discussions, Big Local areas needed to show themselves to be willing to be involved at that broader level, and demonstrate understanding about how wider change could benefit their area. The two examples in the box below illustrate how this has worked in practice.

Examples on the ground

- One Big Local area is a partner and member of a new organisation whose goal is to support, promote and connect up the borough's voluntary and community groups, organisations and social enterprises. As a lead partner in the new organisation, the Big Local area is contributing to the strategic development of the organisation by building membership, representing the sector and communicating and co-ordinating partnerships.
- Another Big Local area was commissioned to pilot a digital health inclusion project that is now being rolled out across their city. Members of the partnership now sit on the steering group for the city-wide programme rollout.

These are examples of positive outcomes where relationships have worked well – though it should be noted that political tensions and changes of regime following local elections have made relationships in some local authorities very sensitive. Indeed, working with councillors was described in some areas as being difficult, or even impossible.

This section describes the many positive outcomes where relationships have worked well. In section five we discuss the value of building relationships with both officers and elected members in order to build productive relationships.

4.2 Housing associations

The main findings of previous research commissioned by Local Trust on community experiences of regeneration highlighted that regeneration focused mostly on housing, not place, and that engagement approaches often restricted participation with little or no involvement of communities in the governance of projects.²

In this research there were examples of positive change, as well as some mixed outcomes:

- **Assets:** Housing associations, including those where they are also the LTO, have often become very involved with the acquisition, development and/or management of a community centre in the Big Local area. This has been mutually beneficial: residents gain a community centre and housing associations can run their community investment activities from that centre, making them more accessible. While this is broadly positive, there have also been some tensions. These are at least in part bound up with them being very different entities – an unincorporated body led by volunteers on the one hand, and a legal body necessarily engaged with charity and housing regulators on the other.
- **Whole community approach:** There was some confusion about the extent to which a housing association's resources – human and monetary – are allowed to be spent in ways that benefit the whole of the local population and physical environment rather than being restricted to their properties and tenants. Some housing associations that took part in the research felt that they needed to be looking at the whole community. One commented: "It doesn't make sense to only work with our tenants; the rest of the community would fall down".
- **Community investment:** Where housing associations perceived a benefit to working with the whole community there was greater alignment with the priorities of Big Local partnerships, and there were examples of productive collaborations – for example,

² Blue Chula (2020) Developing potential: Lessons from community experiences of regeneration

on tackling unemployment and increasing employability, engaging young people, and work on community health and wellbeing.

- **Brokering relationships:** A housing association had used its own power and connections to facilitate and enable one Big Local partnership to extend its own relationships, especially around local authorities and councillors by making introductions and brokering relationships.

The potential for joint work around housing need and supply is underused. In one Big Local partnership there seemed to be little expectation that they might engage with the housing association in strategic thinking about the social rented and wider local housing market. This was despite the housing association teams being focused on community investment themes (such as employment, employability and wellbeing), joining up with the Big Local partnership on food banks and other initiatives, and generally building the capacity of the partnership.

Examples on the ground

- One housing association manages the community café at the Big Local area's community centre. A Big Local worker secured funding from Marcus Rashford's Free School Meals campaign, meaning they have been able to serve over 5000 free school meals from the café together. The housing association commented: "The Big Local area helps us to maintain services – especially as lockdown eases". They are now run a lunch club together in order to reduce isolation for older people. The housing association has funded the tea and the technology to make it happen, while the Big Local is delivering. The housing association describes themselves and the Big Local area as more of a team than just a partnership pooling capacity and resources: "It's the combined strength of the funding".
- For another housing association, being partly dedicated to the wider community is core to their work, and they see the Big Local as part of that commitment. The housing association in question expressed that they would find it "too short-sighted to only work with tenants – that approach doesn't work in our experience".

4.3 Schools

Schools have gained invaluable insight from working with Big Local areas, which have themselves benefited from access to school communities and their assets. Often this connection has been ad hoc or in response to specific projects or activities. Nonetheless, united by a mutual interest in and commitment to local children and young people, they have achieved a range of outcomes.

- Schools and Big Local areas that took part in the research said that working together had led to **initiatives that were more effective and inclusive** because they were developed with the community and driven by people's passion and lived experience, as well as other local evidence of need.
- One Big Local area reported having gained **access to a wider audience** in the school's community of parents and students. They felt that they had gained credibility with the school through being involved in successful projects, such as a career fair, and now had a more responsive and flexible relationship with them.
- Schools and colleges reported gaining a partner they can go to – whether for one-off projects and events or more strategic, long-term initiatives that benefited from the

'insight that can't be taught' mentioned above. Both were highly valued by the schools and colleges that took part in the research.

- Both parties felt the benefits of **mutual support around issues they have in common**, pooling their knowledge and connections to achieve positive outcomes. For example, one school and their Big Local area had worked together to **improve the local environment** through jointly undertaking projects, including adding planting and extra lighting and finding ways to address issues like fly tipping.

Examples on the ground

- Through working together, a school, a Big Local area and the local police supported migrant families whose children had become involved in drug use in ways that were built on an understanding of those families' language and experience.
- A collaboration between a Big Local partnership and the local college was initially focused on supporting autistic students and their families in the community. Over time the collaboration has widened: parents have enrolled after coming to the college for peer support; students have begun to join regular street cleans; and children affected by autism are more supported to see themselves as a part of the college community.

4.4 Health agencies

Health agencies and Big Local areas that worked together felt that they were **creating a safer and healthier environment and making health services work more effectively for the community**. They gave the following examples of what they felt they had achieved together.

- **Embedding healthy living:** Big Local areas have initiated healthy lifestyle projects that have become embedded in communities. Health agencies provided recognition and validation for the projects, taking them on and funding or sustaining them in other ways for the long term. In one Big Local area, a mental health project was celebrating its third birthday; in another, a healthy walking group was celebrating its fifth. Both initiatives are now run by public health agencies.
- **Patient pathways:** Health agencies reported improvements in patient pathways. In one area where even available health services were underused, this began to change when those services were promoted through activities and spaces hosted and run by the Big Local partnership. There were also fewer missed appointments, and since the start of a new friendly drop-in facility, local GPs have been making more effective use of appointments, which themselves have reduced in number.
- **Inclusive:** More inclusive ways of working, and of presenting healthy living services and activities, had led to improved take-up and participation from South Asian communities – from young mums learning about caring for toddlers' teeth, to people experiencing poor mental health.
- **Reducing isolation and keeping people connected during the pandemic:** One Big Local area mobilised and trained volunteers to help get more people connected digitally and reduce isolation during the pandemic. While this was a community-led initiative it had the support of the local Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and local authority, who then looked at how they might sustain and extend the support across the wider district.

Examples on the ground

- Participants said that it can be hard to know where to start when communities want to influence or work with health agencies. Even starting a conversation can be a huge achievement. One Big Local partnership took part in a facilitated conversation with the Clinical Commissioning Group responsible for their area. The conversation allowed them to start getting to know one another, to discover a willingness on both sides to work together, and to begin to spot the challenges and priorities where they might be able to help one another. There is still work to be done, but by the end of the conversation both parties could see that they would be able to develop, as one participant put it, “a new shared culture based on trust”.
- The Healthy Living Team chose to partner with Big Local as a way to achieve greater take-up of their work with young families around toddlers’ oral health. By working with the Big Local partnership who agreed to host the sessions, the health agency felt they had been able to make the sessions accessible, and that attendance and take-up had been higher than it would have otherwise been.

Outcomes for health and wellbeing are strong and clear, although often they are being achieved through working with other voluntary and community organisations rather than health agencies in the public sector. The research also found that strong ties with health agencies were essential even to projects being delivered by community groups. The facilitator of a men’s project being delivered in a community centre, for example, described the links he had with public agencies as ‘wrapping around’ the project, meaning that he knows that he has a way to refer people on or seek advice if there is a serious disclosure. In his words: “The men’s project needed not only a safe space for men but also a network of partnerships to wrap around it”.

5. Conclusion and messages for public agencies

This final section brings together the research findings and puts forward some key messages for public agencies and communities. The research looked at relationships between Big Local areas and public agencies – which ones exist, what makes them work, and what they achieve. It focused on the four most common types of public agency Big Local areas were connecting with: local authorities, schools, housing associations and health agencies. The scoping interviews and desk review that preceded the fieldwork suggest that the experience in Big Local areas has wider relevance for other neighbourhood and community groups and organisations.

5.1 Findings

There is a public policy and good-practice basis to communities seeking relationships with public agencies. All four types of public agency that this research focused on are required or encouraged to work with local communities, and to build this into their plans. Whether they know how to go about this varies. Most local authorities, for example, had lost community engagement and youth-work capacity and expertise because of public funding cuts, and lacked any local presence or footprint in the Big Local area.

Even where there is knowledge, there can be a disconnect between senior leadership commitment and what happens on the ground, especially where the public agency lacks a specific presence in the local area. This research found that Big Local areas can help bridge this gap and make public agency community engagement possible.

The kinds of relationships that communities and public agencies create varies between areas, and can also change over time – from loose acquaintances to close allies and friends; from informal and ad hoc to contractual and structured. Relationships can also be greatly affected by what both parties have experienced in the past. The research found that it helps communities and public agencies to know that it is alright to have a mixture of relationships and to be accepting of people's feelings about the past. Public agencies may be a mixture of any of the following to communities:

- **Powerful allies** who are supportive of the Big Local area and have the power to make things happen.
- **Friends and acquaintances** who have a good relationship with the Big Local area and can be called upon for support when needed.
- **Clients and contractors** with whom the Big Local area has a contractual arrangement to carry out work.

The research showed that what mattered was having the confidence and making the time to recognise the type of relationship that was present, and to work out how to change it if necessary. Being aware of the different types of relationships and what they bring might help Big Local areas choose where to invest their time, and decide how to approach and work with public agencies to best achieve their objectives. It can also help to acknowledge the different roles communities and public agencies take when they work together. These were:

- **Communities:** Initiating a project, way of working or good-practice model based on lived experience; implementing an existing policy or project and helping ensure it fits and is inclusive for the community; influencing decisions through having access to the governance of public agencies.

- **Public agencies:** Enabling community action; opening up public processes for community contribution; brokering connections; facilitating the take-up, scaling or replication of community projects.

In practice, recognising and adapting to these different relationships and roles is challenging and takes trust on both sides. Much has been written about the importance of making time to build trust. In this research, communities and public agencies said that trust had been helped along by:

1. understanding one another's goals and plans, and the wider context for these including any pressures or worries
2. listening to one another's values and being able to spot what they have in common
3. having the chance to admit 'I don't know what you actually do' when necessary, and again begin to spot points of alignment.

Building trust is not easy, nor is creating the space for conversations about goals or values. Having paid support made a considerable difference to Big Local areas in this respect. There is also power in having an independent facilitator to hold a space and enable people to come together, be asked to share reflections and be supported to do so.

With or without paid support, the research found that there are things that both parties can do for themselves that will build trust and understanding about relationships and roles between a community and a public agency. For example, making time for:

- creating spaces and opportunities to spend time together to listen and understand one another's goals, plans, values and challenges
- putting boundaries around what will and won't be discussed at different meetings so that people with public policy responsibilities feel safe to come along, and people who have been hurt or let down in the past know that they will have the opportunity to be heard
- framing the relationship with positive intention – in other words, spending time deliberately focusing on the strengths of a relationship and what the parties can do together.

5.2 Key messages

There is no ignoring the challenges involved in communities and public agencies working together – whether they are historical and structural or to do with capacity, experience or resources – but what this research has shown is that whatever the context, there is scope and possibility for change. By working together, good things get done, and in ways that are more inclusive, welcome and effective than if either party had done them alone.

Local authorities and councillors will find they need multiple relationships between the community and different departments and layers in the hierarchy. Accepting that there is history on both sides, and finding where working together is in fact possible, may be more effective than ignoring historical disagreements or attempting to unpick them. Funding cuts may have dismantled local authority capacity for community engagement, but by joining up with Big Local areas, new routes into the community can be established.

Housing associations can be powerfully supportive allies to communities, provided that their governance and leadership see the value of working with the whole community rather than just their own tenants. Housing associations can add value to community work in many ways, from helping with the acquisition, development or running of a community hub to co-locating their community investment activities, such as employment and training, health and wellbeing, and support for young people.

Schools have gained new insights into the community around them, and been able to pursue projects that they could not have carried out alone. This kind of collaboration has been achieved because the school and the Big Local partnership have established an ongoing dialogue, allowing them to understand one another's priorities and see the potential of working together. Reaching this level of understanding can take time – something that some stretched schools lack currently. One effective way to build this understanding is through a member of a community group sitting on a school's governing board, and a member of that governing board sitting on a community group's committee or joining its meetings. For some schools and communities, starting with a one-off opportunity or invitation to get involved may be a more realistic and productive way to begin to build a closer relationship.

Health agencies can be quite a challenge for communities to understand, so finding ways to open up governance and other structures and demystify processes can be helpful. Getting together to understand the way one another works, and what health and wellbeing issues are being prioritised on both sides, can also help. It is key for health agencies to understand the health and wellbeing work that communities are delivering outside the NHS and public health context, and to work out how their own public sector work can usefully fit together with that of the community.

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Appendix A: Case study examples from the research

Example 1: Council and community working together for the long term

This example highlights the significance of trusted relationships between Big Local partnership members and officers within a local authority at borough level, in a context where there is also a county council and parish councils. The Big Local is in a small town in the east of England and is nearing the end of its Big Local spend. This example pinpoints the shared aims that underpin this relationship, as well as some challenges and limitations. It touches on the community benefit resulting from this relationship and approaches to working together that both partners felt were essential.

"Big Local has enabled people and groups to work together in ways they hadn't previously". (Local authority)

The relationship: The Big Local partnership has a long-standing relationship with its borough council, which is built on strong and positive links with a small number of officers who 'get' Big local and champion it internally. These officers were motivated to develop the relationship because they were interested in the idea of co-working with Big Local, as they acknowledged the connection of the Big Local area to the community; and because of a recognition that there is a skills and confidence gap that is holding communities back from coming forward with even small-scale ideas and proposals for community projects. The partnership is confident and ambitious for the future, but has found it hard to get beyond small-scale projects, or to turn those into major projects.

The relationship with the ward councillors is poor, and there is little contact with the county or parish councils. Relationships that exist between the borough and Big Local are mainly with the council's middle management. Communication at this level is positive and open – a Big Local partnership member said: *"we're able to just pick up the phone and talk about what's possible"*. Nonetheless, there is recognition that the relationship needs to become more strategic, including engaging more with councillors. Both the partnership and the borough council officers acknowledge that the relationship is maybe more reactive than proactive. Some opportunities to sit on borough boards or committees do not feel as strategic as they might be, and can have the feeling of box-ticking rather than attempting to engage deeply with residents.

Outcomes: Borough officers see the Big Local area as encouraging collaboration and innovation. It brings local people together in new combinations and supports small groups to develop their ideas with accessible funding, in a way that the borough council cannot. The partnership agreed that they *"try not to say 'no' to groups"* and concentrate on empowering the community. Through supporting small and local projects, the partnership also helps the council to *"connect the macro to the micro"*, including connecting people to borough wide projects intended to boost civic and community pride.

Effectiveness: Three features of the relationship appear particularly significant in helping their work together: having a champion internally at the borough council; being supported to step back and reflect on the relationship as part of Local Trust's wider programme learning (for example, partnership reviews and taking part in this research); and having independent funding that is held by the community and can be used in small amounts to support emerging projects and ideas.

Looking ahead: As part of this research, the council's deputy CEO joined a meeting with council officers and Big Local partnership members. The council believes that by continuing to work together, there is the potential to leverage more funding for the area; achieve more in their work on levelling up; and increase community power and pride. They see a wider cultural role for the partnership in reducing perceived apathy in other community groups for bidding for funding. The Big Local area shares the council's desire to work on both larger-scale initiatives and smaller projects, aiming to connect people, the council and wider town issues. As Big Local funding comes to an end, both parties agree that it is important maintain momentum, and build on knowledge of the people and groups that the partnership has worked with. They thought that the following strategies might help:

- To meet regularly and purposefully.
- To hold a celebratory exhibition that would be a chance to share what has been achieved especially with ward councillors.
- The partnership could use remaining time to act as facilitator to bring groups together with the council and help work out what the town's future Big Local might look like.

Wider learning: This example shows the importance to communities and public bodies of:

- taking time to building the relationship between community members and council officers
- recognising the value that relationships between communities and councils bring and being motivated to do more to support them
- developing positive, responsive relationships and communication between communities and council officers.

Example 2: Embedding a connection between a community and their school

This example describes how work together between a Big Local and Further Education (FE) college has resulted in positive changes from local to national level, particularly in relation to local support for families with autistic children. The Big Local area is in a market town setting in the north of England and is halfway through its Big Local spend. The relationship between the college and the Big Local partnership is longstanding and personal, but is helped by community focused leadership in the college.

The relationship: People involved and working with Big Local and the local college feel there is a great relationship between the two and describe the college as being the heart of the community. There is a feeling that the college is interested in all things community, and in finding ways to be inclusive – and these values resonate with their Big Local area. This is a strong, active, reciprocal and constructive relationship, which has many outcomes – at an individual level, community level, organisational level, and beyond to colleges outside the area, as well as influencing in Westminster. The partnership is both strategic and practical.

The relationship between Big Local and the college has grown over time through personal relationships. For example, when the current head teacher joined, he committed to developing and growing that relationship, recognising the potential in their shared values. Since then, they have collaborated in a range of ways, such as

offering peer support for parents of neurodiverse children. They have also helped grow more links between the college and different community centres in the area.

The idea for peer support for parents of neurodiverse children grew from the experience of the Big Local chair who cares for a son with severe learning difficulties and autism. *"I had a conversation [with others on the BL partnership and the worker] about my frustrations as an autism mum..."*, they said. *"There is nothing local, I can travel out but support in [area] was taken from us when funding cuts hit"*. The Big Local worker got in touch with a parent-run group supporting families with children and young adults on the autistic spectrum. Together they approached the college and asked for space to set up a peer support group.

The college agreed to provide the space, and also connected them to their own programme aimed at supporting learners with multiple needs. They commented:

"We teamed up with them. It started small - with their students baking with us, and they came in and made tea with parents. We teamed up... offering free membership as a hook for parents and families. After a year or so it started really growing."

The monthly peer support café provides space to talk about anything and everything, not just de-escalation strategies and support. Through being in touch with this group the college principle understood the need for advocacy support for people affected by autism, and advocacy support is now embedded in the college.

Outcomes: The peer support café has connected with isolated people often afraid to go out because they felt no-one else understood their needs. From this, the college gained an invaluable insight into autism, while the parents and children involved experienced the link to the college and its learning opportunities. Some parents have gone on to enrol in classes themselves. In return, Big Local offers work-experience placements for students, including those with additional needs who find it difficult to get work experience elsewhere and may need more support.

The Big Local area has also connected college students with opportunities to develop social enterprises and business activities, nurturing their ideas and aspirations. One student now runs a website; another has a small gardening business. Other educational institutions have copied the idea: *"[It's a] genuine fantastic idea from a parent that's in your shoes"* (chair of Big Local). And the learning from this initiative has reached parliament – through it, an ex-MP who chairs the All-party Autism Group in Westminster came to learn about the experience of families, and of young people with autism in education.

Effectiveness: The Big Local partnership emphasises the benefits of partnership working across the community, business and public sectors, and there are written joint-working agreements in place to keep things clear. Positive relationships between paid staff in both the college and Big Local have been critical to success, with the additional benefit of wider informal contact time. Both parties have shared values and goals and a passion to pursue them together. College staff sit on the Big Local partnership as a friend and get involved with volunteer community projects. These include clean-ups and the food distribution project (previously fully, and now partly, funded by the Big Local area). The Big Local partnership's food distribution project now provides breakfasts at the college. The college also invites a Big Local worker into the college a few times each term to promote Big Local and what they are doing. While there is a certain amount of red tape involved when working with the college, this does appear to be much less than the Big Local has experienced when working with other public agencies.

Looking ahead: A lot has been achieved in creating a new space for families with autistic children, and there is optimism for further collaboration in future. There is a real worry about what the college stands to lose when Big Local ends. They commented: "I have to say that [Big Local] is a real positive thing for the community and for the college – they champion the college as much as they can. We know they only have funding for the next couple of years – if they go we will really miss them (...) I don't know how we would continue. The peer support café is not self-sustaining without Big Local funding."

Wider learning: This example shows the importance to communities and public bodies of:

- identifying a shared priority – in this case support for families with autistic children
- spotting and building on opportunities to work with education partners when they arise
- working to achieve outcomes that meet the needs of both partners and where necessary having written joint working agreements in place.

Example 3: Starting the conversation with a health agency

This example draws on learning from the relationship between a Big Local and Primary Care Network (made up of GP practices working together with community services, mental health services, social care services, pharmacies, and hospital and voluntary services) in their local areas and Clinical Commissioning Group (a clinically-led group including all of the GP groups in a geographical area with responsibility for organising the delivery of NHS services). Working together is still at an early stage, but there are already foundations for developing some shared objectives in the immediate future. The Big Local area is in an urban, town setting near a large city, and is about halfway through its Big Local spend.

"This primary care network has huge potential to support people from more social aspects. Understanding that it's wider than health is key" (Health agency)

"We want to understand the primary care network's priorities and for them to understand ours, and what we can ask each other for or help with" (Big Local partnership)

The relationship: Through involvement in this research the Big Local partnership identified the desire and need to understand their relationship with their Primary Care Network (PCN), which they felt held considerable power, information and funding for health outcomes. The partnership was supported to explore this assumption, and to consider how their knowledge of the community and its needs could be valued in this relationship.

Outcomes: At this stage the partners are developing intended outcomes for their work together. The Big Local partnership and a representative from the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) came together to do some work on the extent and nature of relationships between the Big Local partnership and the health system locally. From this they understood the need and potential for Big Local to act as both a strategic and local delivery partner, building on existing foundations; and that there is a good fit between them in terms of shared aims and reaching the community, including through the Big Local Hub. The CCG values the Big Local area's characteristics of being resident-led and strongly concerned with communities and

their wellbeing. The COVID-19 pandemic has made even clearer the importance of community responses in addressing health issues.

Through the facilitated process, both partners identified local health-related challenges and opportunities to work on them. Challenges identified were:

- 'Waiting well' (a way of managing the waiting process for health procedures by combining addressing the backlog of appointments alongside communicating with people about their place in the system and addressing other issues in the meantime where possible)
- Long COVID
- The crisis in homecare

Opportunities to work jointly on these issues were:

- Strengthen social prescribing and prevent deterioration
- Support community assets (recognising the experience everyone brings as a valuable asset, and seeking out and valuing the experience of those who find it hard to contribute solutions formally)
- A new culture and value base (that is, joint working on establishing a shared culture rather than just tweaking or tinkering with what's there already)

Effectiveness: This example highlights the necessity of identifying key questions that will help communities and health agencies working together. The facilitated conversation between the Big Local and CCG focused on:

- what is happening in the community?
- what would have the most impact (potentially with low investment)?
- what are the most pressing issues?

Both felt it important to understand each other's respective roles, avoid duplication, and make sure there is appropriate training and supervision if needed. A participant in the facilitation conversation said: *"otherwise it's like having the jigsaw pieces without seeing the picture."*

Essential elements of an effective community response were identified as:

- having a local track record of addressing the underlying issues that put pressure on hospitals or exclude people (for example, reducing missed hospital appointments and ceasing to send hospital letters to residents unable to read them due to a sight impairment)
- effective and accessible communication in the community
- making the most of local assets and helping people realise their potential with tools that will help, such as basic First Aid and Mental Health First-Aid, and making links to the NHS Leadership Academy.

Looking ahead: Both parties identified that they want to achieve, as one participant put it, "a new shared culture based on trust". They believe the timing is right because of the challenges their communities are facing, and the opportunity to overcome these if they work together. There was a further catalyst in coming together: to bring in and work with a new organisation in the area aiming to support, promote and connect the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sectors. The Big Local area has built foundations in the community and is aware of and working with a preventative approach – for example, supporting wellbeing activities to prevent ill

health. They also felt they could “make high level strategic talk make sense at a community level”. Together they identified a range of initiatives that they could take forward together based on increased understanding of each other’s strengths, knowledge, connections and limitations:

- Common projects and pilots or ‘test and learn’ approaches (what are the common problems, such as social isolation, we want to solve?).
- Genuine community consultation – amplifying the voice of individuals and families.
- Understanding the challenges for communities coming out of the pandemic.

“At the Provider Collaborative meeting this afternoon we agreed that neighbourhood working would be our priority over the next six months - I think the work [here] gives us a good start.” (Health agency representative)

Wider learning: This example shows the importance to communities and public bodies of:

- encouraging and supporting communities to become not only delivery partners with the health agencies, but also to become strategic partners and use their local intelligence to inform policy
- identifying the ‘fit’ between what community groups can do and their public health sector partners – both in relation to shared aims and reaching the community
- valuing the distinctive contribution that communities can make as part of a wider ecosystem of health and wellbeing (in the Big Local programme this includes being resident-led and having a holistic approach to the wellbeing of the whole community).

Example 4: Big Local working with the community’s landlord and housing association

This example summarises learning from the experience of a Big Local area working with a housing association in its community, which is also its Locally Trusted Organisation (LTO), the organisation chosen by the Big Local partnership to administer and account for the distribution of its funding. Through the shared aim of supporting the community in its broadest sense, and an awareness of each other’s strengths, working together has resulted in deeper understanding of the importance and resident-led decision making to local community development. The Big Local area is in small town setting in the north-west of England.

“You have to be behind every aspect of the project. It’s long-term work and you have to put aside your expectations. And you have to hang onto that for years. It’s a long-term commitment.” (Housing association)

The relationship: The LTO for this Big Local area is the housing association that lets most of the social rented homes in the area. The relationship with the Big Local area is managed through the association’s community investment arm, and its worker is an experienced community development professional who has been seconded to them by the association. The housing association has had properties and worked in the area for many years prior to the Big Local programme and will continue to do so after the programme ends. Both the Big Local area and housing association want to see the community thrive and have similar priorities, such as increasing employability, health and wellbeing in the area. These shared aims provide a foundation for working

together. The association's charitable objects allow it to work with the whole community rather than just its tenants.

The housing association's original motivation to get involved with Big Local was "to support our communities". That motivation remains. Over the years the housing association has grown, and with that growth has come a change in its governance and the way it handles risk. Its growth has sometimes affected its ability to work flexibly and responsively with the community, and what activities they want to pursue. These changes in the housing association have had a ripple effect on their relationship with the Big Local partnership.

Effectiveness: The housing association and Big Local have achieved more through working together.

The Big Local partnership is seen as being very good at working with public agencies (and others), and is seen as an excellent partner to work with. The housing association said: "Their passion for what they wanted to do for the community – you couldn't help but want to be part of it". Their passion and drive have permeated the relationship with the housing association, which is deeply commitment to the ambitions of Big Local.

The housing association and Big Local have been able to work on common themes, especially around employment and employability, with Big Local hosting services and support offers that the housing association brings. There is good alignment between the two parties around a number of other themes, including health and wellbeing in the community.

Big Local benefits from having access to the housing association's internal resources (for example, finance and insurance, or legal and contracts expertise), which has helped with negotiations over the acquisition and leasing arrangements for the community centre that the Big Local area now manages. This is also a result of the LTO relationship that Big Local has with the housing association. The Big Local area aims to form a legal entity, which will enable it to take over the building.

Outcomes: The housing association has learned more from the experience of working with Big Local about the importance of stepping back and having real respect for the ideas and projects that have been developed and driven by residents.

Looking ahead: The way housing associations are regulated is likely to continue to push them towards careful management of any risks. Both parties will need to find the balance between the processes and policies that will manage risk (particularly in considering taking on buildings) while empowering the community to pursue its priorities:

"We want them to be able to crack on! Otherwise, it's frustrating for them [but we are] now working towards the partnership understanding that... and being able to do a risk assessment [in relation to the community building] It's a learning curve for us all."
(Housing association staff)

Wider learning: This example shows the importance to communities and public bodies of:

- valuing the passion and connection to local people that community groups can offer to housing associations
- valuing the positive support and stability that a connection with a local housing association can provide to a community (for example, through being the accountable body for an unincorporated group, holding assets, and supporting with the development of governance, risk management and policies)

- realising the potential for joint work across issues of deep concern to the community and the housing association, such as employment and employability or financial exclusion.

Appendix B: Methodology

The research approach and methods enabled us to work flexibly, responsively and iteratively with Local Trust and Big Local areas, and helped us make the research accessible and manageable for Big Local areas. These methods drew on visual research, participatory mapping and coaching techniques, as well as group facilitation and interviews. All methods were developed in ways that allowed for remote, in-person and hybrid delivery. The work was carried out in three phases – scoping, fieldwork and analysis – during June to October 2021.

Scoping

The scoping phase had two aims: to inform the fieldwork and to share lessons from the existing literature. In order to carry this out we:

- Identified and reviewed 48 research and policy documents produced by Local Trust and others offering insights into relationships between communities and public agencies prior and subsequently to March 2020. In agreement with Local Trust, we dedicated more time to sources published after March 2020 that looked at how the pandemic had affected relationships.
- Carried out 10 stakeholder interviews and discussions engaging 15 people from within Local Trust and the Big Local programme, and from one each of the four types of public agency.
- Reviewed data collected from Big Local reps in 2020 where they were asked a small number of questions about relationships with public agencies.
- Formulated new questions to be included in the 2021/22 Quarter 1 reps survey and analysed those responses as part of this report. The questions were:
 - Which public agencies does your partnership have a relationship with?
 - Who in the Big Local usually holds the relationships with public agencies?
 - What is the purpose of the relationships? Reps were asked to say what best described the purpose of the relationships from the following:
 - Developing or delivering projects, activities or services in partnership/collaboration.
 - Promoting and sharing information about respective projects, activities and services.
 - Participating in networks and forums with public agencies.
 - Giving and receiving informal advice and support.
 - Receiving funding from the public agency to deliver projects, activities or services.
 - Developing or acquiring assets from the public agency.
 - Consulting and gathering community feedback on public sector projects, activities, or services.
 - Providing routes into the community, and a trusted platform for the public agency.
 - Providing routes into the public agency for community members.

- Working on large development/infrastructure projects with the public agency.
- Funding the public agencies to deliver projects, activities or services.
- To what extent have you noticed the Big Local partnership’s relationships with public agencies changing over the past year?
- Over the next 12 months, do you think the Big Local partnership is likely to work more closely with public agencies?

During this phase we also held inception meetings with Local Trust and within our research delivery team. We used these to help us deepen our thinking about how we understand ‘effectiveness’ and how we can best organise ourselves and our work to be of most benefit to participants.

Fieldwork

The research was carried out in 10 Big Local areas and engaged a total of 38 people working in public agencies and 65 people working in Big Local communities (see breakdown below) in a variety of roles offering operational and leadership perspectives, as well as resident, volunteer and community development work angles. Most of these participants contributed to the research through the relationship mapping workshops, and a semi-structured interview or a facilitated conversation.

10 people working with Local Trust	65 people working in communities	38 people working in public agencies
Local Trust staff members	44 Big Local partnership members	11 people working in local authorities
Local Trust partners	11 Big Local workers	6 people working in housing associations
	10 Big Local reps	6 people working in schools
		7 people working in health agencies
		7 elected councillors
		1 Job Centre Plus

The 10 areas were selected based on the following criteria: to avoid Big local partnerships who were already actively participating in fieldwork for other research; achieving a reasonable geographical spread across England; and covering a range of public agency relationships. The Big Local areas we approached to take part were cautious not to over-commit their time and resources to this research. This was in part due to the research coinciding with the school summer holiday and the easing of COVID-19 restrictions. All participating Big Local areas and public agencies have been anonymised.

Scoping calls and document review

For each Big Local area included in the sample, Local Trust provided a summary local statistical social and economic data ('Local Insight') and programme documents including the area's own 'Big Local plan' for their area and associated reviews, assessments or reports submitted by the Big Local rep that supports them.

Each area was approached for an initial scoping call – usually with the Big Local rep and Big Local partnership chair – to discuss the purpose of the research and begin to understand the kinds of experiences and perspectives that we might be able to learn from in each area. The approach and likely methods were also discussed so that we could adjust the initial research design to their capacity and interest.

Participatory relationship mapping workshops

Ten relationship mapping sessions took place – one in each of the 10 Big Local areas where in-depth fieldwork took place – with between 4–12 stakeholders at each session including Big Local partnership members, reps and workers as well as some LTOs and public agencies.

The sessions were designed as a fun, creative session where Big Local partnerships would map out the range of their relationships with public agencies, identify two important criteria for what makes these relationships effective, and then analyse their relationships against these criteria. In practice, the sessions were designed to move through three stages: a general (often messy!) map of all relationships, then two specific maps: one of a good relationship and one of a relationship they'd like to develop or do some work on. The maps were drawn onto attractive templates, and we supplied shapes and a key to what each shape signified (outcomes, for example).

What we learned:

- The maps were a great conversation enabler that allowed people to draw out and discuss positives and negatives in their experience of public agency relationships.
- The maps were hand-painted, making them visually appealing and accessible. This seemed to have a positive impact on people's engagement, making the hard work done by residents feel both appealing and valued.
- Asking Big Local residents to decide what effectiveness was for them at the start of the session framed the mapping process in a way that was authentic and meaningful to each resident.
- A simple key provided thematic prompts for each Big Local to work through. This meant that while the maps were personalised in terms of effectiveness they were also consistent and could be compared.

Facilitated conversations

Each Big Local area was offered the opportunity to have a facilitated conversation with a public agency where they wanted to develop the relationship or do some work on it. These were identified as part of the mapping. They included right facilitated conversations in seven areas (one area had a second conversation to build on the first) between Big Local partnerships and local authorities, a college, health agencies and a housing association.

The idea was for this to be a conversation between the Big Local partnership and a public agency in a shared (and facilitated) space, using coaching-style questions that would help

tease out and encourage sharing and reflecting. Attendance was mainly limited to no more than two people from each party.

What we learned:

- It was positive to be able to offer this as an opportunity, although for some areas the timing wasn't always right.
- It was perhaps especially well-suited to health agencies, where communities can really struggle even to initiate a conversation. Facilitation helped to leverage conversation and set a relationship off on a good track.
- Areas can really see the potential for these conversations to help unstick difficulties in their relationships with public agencies, but it can take time to engineer a conversation in ways that mean both parties feel they are choosing to have the conversation. The role of the rep was sometimes very helpful in achieving this.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews

In order to capture the experiences and perspectives of a range of public agencies and partners in each area we identified a number of other organisations and individuals for short interviews in person, online or by phone at their convenience. This added to both breadth and depth of insight. See table above for details.

Analysis

The following processes have contributed to the analysis presented in this report:

- The research team produced area-level writeups of the data collected in each of the 10 Big Local areas focused on in the research. This included identifying themes and issues about relationships between the Big Local area and the four types of public agencies of interest overall, and in-depth look at one or more of these relationships.
- The research team met regularly throughout the fieldwork phase, to debrief and share emerging themes. At the end of the fieldwork, the team reviewed the area-level writeups and met to collectively analyse the findings. They did this with respect to each research question, looking at what had emerged overall and by type of public agency.
- Local Trust staff and partners took part in a collaborative analysis workshop where they were shown summaries of the data and emerging analysis. They were invited to share their reflections on what was being learned and what that means for relationships between communities and public agencies now and in the future. Local Trust invited members of their Big Local Policy and Advocacy Panel, a forum created in January 2020 for Big Local areas to be involved in shaping Local Trust's policy and advocacy work, to this workshop. The responses from the workshop fed into this research.

About this report

Big Local relationships with public agencies explores how communities are connecting with local authorities, housing associations, schools and health agencies and what can be learned from their experiences. Gathering perspectives from residents in Big Local areas and the public agencies they have worked with, the research identifies eight criteria for effective relationships, alongside the key factors affecting these relationships.

About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of communities. We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding, and to draw on the learning from our work delivering the Big Local programme to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

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About Just Ideas

Just Ideas Sustainable Solutions Ltd. is an independent social consultancy established in 2007, supporting communities, charities, public sector organisations and businesses working towards positive social and environmental change. We believe in supporting people to realise their power and voice. We value connecting people so they can create positive change locally and globally.

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