

Ending well and moving on: Supporting volunteers as they leave Big Local

July 2024

Ending is a natural part of all projects and programmes. But few programmes are designed with the end in mind, despite their significant impact on the individuals who participate. This summary sets out findings from research with the Big Local programme's resident volunteers, and how organisations can support volunteers to end well.

Background

Big Local is a resident-led programme that has distributed over £1 million to 150 disadvantaged communities across England. Within this, groups of residents, referred to as Big local partnerships, have been given the power to decide how to spend dedicated funds to make a lasting positive impact in their local areas.

This summary report is written by Shift, who were commissioned by Local Trust to conduct research in 2023, three years before the end of the Big Local programme. By this point, Local Trust had already developed significant support for partnerships approaching the end of their Big Local funding and involvement in the programme, known as "close out".

This research aimed to build on this partnership-level support by capturing the support needs of individual volunteers approaching the end of their involvement. The research also captured the experiences of individuals working with and supporting partnership volunteers, as well as perspectives from outside the programme, including those with experience from similar programmes. It informed recommendations then given to Local Trust on how they can best support volunteers.

What are the options available when programmes like this end?

To situate the end of an individual's involvement in the Big Local programme, it is important first to understand the context in which these endings take place. The prevailing dominant narrative is that organisational growth is good, and decline is bad. This is particularly true in community-based work where people are driven by a personal desire to make positive impacts where they live, supported by a 'survive at all costs' mindset. This narrative fails to recognise the natural cyclical relationship between growth and decline that occurs in all organisations and systems.

"Fuelled by deep passion, belief and hope, we have been led to believe that the brave, bold, ambitious thing is to start something new, to chart uncharted waters, to grow it relentlessly and to survive at all costs."

Iona Lawrence, Stewarding Loss¹

¹ *Stewarding loss is a field-building organisation dedicated to guiding civil society and non-profit organisations through closures via a range of initiatives.*

For this research, we have borrowed the Berkana Two Loop model, illustrated by the diagram, to describe partnership endings, evolutions and transitions. The first loop represents the existing system that is ending, and the second shows the work of an emergent system that will follow. As we're using it in this report, the Big Local programme can be thought of as the 'existing system' which has supported local changemakers to come together and make an impact in their local areas.

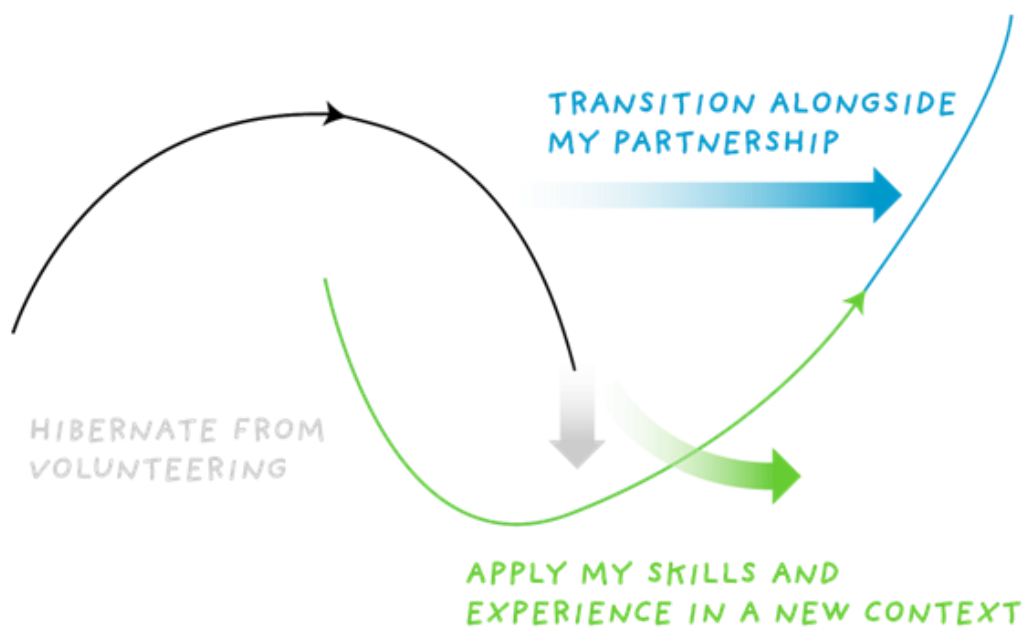


As these resident-led systems come to an end, there are three options for the Big Local partnerships. First, partnerships can **discontinue** which may be appropriate if there are no longer the resources or community members able to sustain the partnership, or if the partnership is no longer serving the needs of the community.

Second, partnerships can **evolve**, which is appropriate when the currently functioning partnership will discontinue, but the work and achievements of the partnership (such as the services, physical assets, activities etc) will be picked up and taken on by other groups or organisations locally. Finally, partnerships can **transition**, which is viable when the partnership is still serving a need and there are individuals willing and able to sustain it beyond Big Local in a new capacity, such as an incorporated organisation. Across our research the vast majority of partnerships at Big Local had decided to transition.

Volunteers expressed that endings are an emotional and challenging time for all involved. For many Big Local volunteers, this is the culmination of up to 15 years of work, involving significant personal sacrifice and effort. Regardless which of the three endings a partnership chooses, individual volunteers will have to decide what is right for them. We have identified three distinct options that individual volunteers will need to be supported to choose between, and make a success of, at this time:

1. **Hibernate from volunteering:** End all involvement in volunteering, either temporarily or for the foreseeable future.
2. **Apply skills and experience in a new context:** Taking what has been gained and evolving it in a different environment, organisation or role.
3. **Transition alongside a partnership:** Continue as a volunteer in the same partnership that has transitioned into an incorporated or new legal body following the end of the Big Local programme, perhaps re-establishing and redefining their roles.



Each of these three endings provide unique challenges and opportunities for individuals. However, Local Trust can support individuals to choose the right end for them.

What supports good volunteer endings?

From the research, we identified five needs volunteers had to achieve a good ending. These are relevant for all volunteers across all three possible endings.

1. Volunteers need to feel clear, unified and well-supported to achieve what they set out to do

Volunteers value clarity about what ending means and how to approach it confidently. In the context of Big Local, we've found that this necessitates clarity on both Local Trust's and the partnership's timelines and the available support. Firstly, volunteers need to understand the partnership and Local Trust's plans for ending

well ahead of time to be able to make personal plans that align with what's happening in their area.

"When the milestones keep changing, that's a disaster for those lower down the decision-making order."

Iona Lawrence, Stewarding Loss

It's also important that volunteers feel confident that there is support available to them to preserve their good work and protect the positive impact of their partnership on the community. For volunteers wanting to transition alongside their partnership, this includes accessing support to do so, enabling them to sustain what's been most effective.

"It's daunting to get to the end and have a cliff-edge. One of the best things here is that people know if they have an idea, they can have it funded - it would be a shame to not be able to do that easily locally. I'd hate to see it go back to how it used to be. [Our area] used to have a really bad reputation - it's no longer so easy to blame the area. People from other areas say they're jealous of this too."

Maria, Big Local chair

We've also observed that a good ending is connected to the sense of unity felt across a partnership about its collective mission and the ambitions for its ending. Some volunteers who weren't at the point of ending had experienced disunity in their partnership before and felt this would be crucial to overcome as their partnership ended.

2. Volunteers need permission and space to take their best next step

Ending well requires all volunteers to reflect on the aspects of what they have found challenging or joyful to inform the next best choice for them. As we've experienced through this research, the very nature of volunteering means that it is difficult for individuals to create the space and time for reflection, as it is felt that community needs far outweigh their own. But while it may be difficult, volunteers and the Local Trust team recognise that this is essential for a good ending.

For some volunteers, the end of the partnership will be a natural transition into another local role they're already connected to through their network. We heard from other volunteers that they are struggling to make a decision about the future – either due to a lack of clarity around timelines, process around endings and their options in relation to their next steps.

"My aim is finding something new for me - a void will need filling. Something where I'm invited to attend meetings and give input."

Suraj, Big Local vice-chair

Other volunteers spoke about the need for opportunities which would protect the personal growth they'd experienced through the programme, with some fearing a

return to circumstances they'd left behind. They sought to identify new opportunities, connections and structures within which they could thrive.

"My partner can see a massive difference in me. I never used to go out, or say anything - the worst thing would be to go back to how it was."

Simona, Big Local chair

Not all volunteers will want to continue being active and volunteering their time in their community, and we've seen a need to also make space and give permission for this at the programme's end. Volunteers will need to feel a sense of permission from themselves, their partnership, Local Trust and their community.

3. Volunteers need to maintain or replace connections with organisations and communities that support them

Volunteers have built new local connections and alliances to make their partnership a success, and they have been supported by Local Trust and the national network of 150 Big Local partnerships navigating similar challenges in Big Local. For many, the end of the programme represents a significant loss of connections, and these volunteers will need to find new relationships with individuals and organisations that serve them.

While involved in Big Local, volunteers have usually had clear points of contact for advice, guidance and support. Some of these have been hosted and delivered centrally, while other contacts will have emerged and been sustained at a local level. When the programme ends, this clarity will be challenged, and volunteers will need a new understanding of where they can access the support they need to sustain and nourish them.

We also heard volunteers speak of the importance of community connections in delivering high-quality and adaptable solutions to local problems. Many spoke to us of networks being essential sources of good ideas and shared a need to understand how these connections could be protected or replaced.

"Having that network and community is crucial to my confidence."

Simona, Big Local chair

4. Volunteers need to feel validated by and protected from the community regardless of the outcome

When we asked volunteers to imagine what the best programme end would look like to them, many spoke about being able to see, hear and feel a tangible change in the places they live, which are similarly recognised by other residents in their area. In this way, validation will often come from other members of their community, and we've heard of a need to ensure volunteers are aware of how their work positively impacts programme stakeholders.

Some volunteers fear a lack of this community validation. And we've seen a need for them to be protected if the community isn't happy with what their Big Local partnership has done or where it hasn't delivered as promised. Linked to this, the

need for the narrative around ending to reflect the theme of “achievement through adversity” has felt resonant to many volunteers, acknowledging the social challenges of the programme.

“My biggest fear is that my local area will think that we failed and not done anything... People saying that we've spent all the money on salaries which just isn't true [...] if local people are happy, I'll probably finally think that we've achieved something.”

Claire, Big Local chair

Relatedly, we've heard that volunteers want to feel confident that they will not leave a vacuum of support for the vulnerable people they've been supporting. And they will need to feel confident in what will be offered in their absence.

5. Volunteers rarely consider their wellbeing in volunteering and ending is an opportunity to set boundaries for the first time

Big Local volunteers often put the needs of the partnership above their own. We found it was a challenge for volunteers to share how they consider their boundaries, and the end of the programme presents an opportunity for individuals to do this – in some cases, for the first time. We saw a need for volunteers to be afforded space to set boundaries and process the range of emotions that will arise around the end of the programme and what's next for them.

“Acknowledge the emotional impact of [ending] and provide staff and volunteers with opportunities to talk about their feelings either in a one-to-one or group meeting.”

National Council for Voluntary Organisation (NCVO)

One important need connected to boundary-setting is the need for recognition of new and changing roles. Endings are times when volunteers have to be doing two roles at once - planning for what's next while continuing to deliver against what's been committed to, and the asks made of them in the run-up to the programme's end will need to be sensitive to this.

Reflections

Volunteers are the heart of the Big Local programme and, across each of the 150 Big Local partnerships, there are devoted individuals driven by the desire to make a real impact in their community.

The end of the programme means many different things to different volunteers, from a welcome break after years of community work to the loss of a central part of their identity. Across all these feelings, fears and ambitions, volunteers must be supported in taking the end, or next step, that is right for them.

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.

localtrust.org.uk

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About Shift

Shift was a multi-award-winning social research and design charity with 15 years of experience helping purpose-led organisations and charities strengthen and sustain their social impact. Shift used expertise in participatory research, rigorous design thinking, social innovation and practical implementation to help partners find and make their best contribution to the issues that matter to them most. Shift closed as an organisation in May 2024.

Local Trust is registered in England and Wales, charity number 1147511, company number 07833396.

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Front cover: Celebrating International Women’s Day at Mottingham Big Local, March 2024 (Photo: Local Trust/Claudia Leisinger).

