

Big Local as Change Agent March 2020

Angus McCabe, Mandy Wilson and Rob Macmillan

With: Paul Morgans, Phil Ware and Creative Media

Summary

Big Local is a long-term resident-led programme established in 2010 which provides resources and support to 150 communities across England. It is supported by Local Trust and operates with an underpinning ethos expressed in the hypothesis that *'long term funding and support to build capacity gives residents in hyper local areas agency to take decisions and to act to create positive and lasting change'*. This highlights the significance of **agency** in generating **change**.

['Our Bigger Story'](#) is the longitudinal multi-media evaluation that runs alongside Big Local, charting the stories of change in 15 different Big Local areas, covering urban, rural and seaside communities. Based on evaluation research between 2017 and 2019, **this report explores Big Local as a catalytic 'change agent'**, looking at the nature of change, and the differences Big Local is making in these areas.

There are three main messages from this wave of the evaluation:

1. **Change associated with Big Local is multi-faceted.** It can be seen in lots of different ways for individuals, local groups and across communities as a whole. It can involve, for example, reducing social isolation, boosting confidence and aspirations, building new skills and employment opportunities, developing community groups, voluntary organisations and new ventures, opening community hubs and spaces, improving the physical environment, and helping to generate a greater sense of community spirit and cohesion. Big Local can also

involve **convening and coordinating actions**, although the impact on higher level strategic developments is less developed at this stage in the programme.

2. **Big Local mobilises a range of actors, resources and approaches to create change.** It brings together residents as both active partnership members and volunteers with specialist paid workers, support from expert Reps and Locally Trusted Organisations (LTOs), and other agencies involved in delivering local services and activities. Change is generated through a combination of Big Local funding and other leveraged resources, capacity building at local and national levels, but crucially through **local knowledge and commitment - a passion about place**.
3. **Resident-led change faces significant challenges and dilemmas.** These can be 'internal' in terms of personalities and power struggles, the inaccessible ways in which partnerships sometimes operate, and tensions within the community. Crucially, however, they also relate to 'external' forces such as planning regulations, and wider policy change - there is sometimes limited understanding of, and scope for, influencing key strategic decision-makers.

The Big Local model provides significant resources for resident-led action, but also combines a patient time-scale, additional support, an institutional structure of partnerships and Locally Trusted Organisations, and a hyper-local community approach. The report concludes that the **support and resources available to Big Local areas are just a starting point, for bringing about resident-led change**.

Change in Big Local

Big Local is based on a long term and resident led approach that seeks to create lasting change in communities. Counter to conventional programmes that rely on top down project led and time limited funding, Local Trust believes that *'significant change in any place takes time and has to be founded on and around the people who live there'*. At its heart are four Big Local outcomes:

- Communities will be better able to identify local needs and take action in response to them.
- People will have increased skills and confidence, so that they continue to identify and respond to needs in the future.
- The community will make a difference to the needs it prioritises.
- People will feel that their area is an even better place to live.

It is with these outcomes in mind that each Big Local partnership determines the priorities for its own area and produces and reviews community plans to make change happen. The purpose of these activities can be summarised in the following diagram:



These plans comprise a vision for the area, an action plan and costings. From September 2019, they also include a legacy statement to illustrate their direction of travel beyond the life of Big Local.



Change for individuals

A key theme across Big Local areas is affecting change for individual residents. This involves either running, supporting or funding activities which;

- Reduce social isolation and promote wellbeing – though regular arts. Crafts, knit and natter' and luncheon clubs
- Targeted support such as support groups and recreational opportunities for young people, families and older residents
- Promote volunteering and broader community engagement
- More developmental support for individuals to access employment opportunities or establish social enterprises.
- Meet basic needs – such as foodbanks.



Change for groups and organisations

There is strong evidence demonstrating the ways in which Big Local partnerships have supported the creation, growth and development of community and voluntary organisations. They have done this through:

- Grants and capacity building support
- Building social infrastructure

- Identifying and addressing gaps in local services



Broader community change

In addition to changes for individuals and groups in Big Local areas there is evidence of impacts for the wider community. This is most evident in relation to physical and environmental improvements, such as green energy initiatives, landscaping and the creation of play spaces, and regarding the development of community hubs. There are also less tangible aspects of change, such as increasing people's feelings and aspirations for their area, building a communities confidence to articulate needs and represent themselves in local political and consultative forums and work towards strategic change – such as renewable energy initiatives.



How change happens – strategies for change

Partnership members, volunteers and community activists, paid workers and Locally Trusted Organisations all have a part to play in generating change.

The way the funding is used can be an important catalyst for creating and delivering change. However, other factors come into play as well, such as developmental support and encouragement, building motivations,

sustaining energy, encouraging risk taking (as well as learning from risk) and modelling different ways of working.

The factors which generate change arise from:

- the Big Local model and approach
- the particular approaches taken in different local contexts,
- the extent to which people feel they have the power to make change.



Conclusions and reflections

Big Local has, at its core, a model of community led change at a hyper-local level which is based on long term funding and support. Elements of the model are:

- **Time:** Big Local is unique as a continuous programme that allows its recipients 10 -15 years to create and deliver a vision for their communities. This has enabled communities to work at their own pace in building a steering group and then a partnership, carrying out a community profile, designing timed plans to meet local aspirations, and then implementing them.
- **Support:** this is intended to be flexible and responsive, and has been delivered through the Big Local Reps, training and networking events, and advice and expertise from programme partners. Local Trust's 'hands on, hands off' approach has illustrated a welcome and responsive support mechanism.
- **Locally Trusted Organisations:** The LTO model was intended to free Big Local partnerships from an inward looking focus, bureaucracy and the detail of money management. There are varied experiences of the relationship between Big Local

partnerships and LTOs, and several partnerships are now moving towards incorporation as a legal entity.

- **The Big Local partnerships:** Around a third of the OBS case study partnerships can be described as 'sturdy' – they have some dynamism in that new people have joined the partnership / taken on new roles, people work together to make change happen and they wouldn't crumble if one or two people left. There are a couple of partnerships that function well but are reliant on one or two key people and would be very fragile if they left, and another couple that have struggled with conflict and tensions. The rest can be described as having a fragile maturity, either because they have lacked leadership and drive or because they have been over reliant on paid workers who dominate.



The structures and cultures which promote and/or inhibit resident led change are complex. Then there is the issue of how Big Local partnerships relate to the wider community and the nature of those communities themselves. However, Our Bigger Story has uncovered a lot of very positive stories of change. The concept of putting residents at the very heart of that change is showing its value up and down the country.



- **The hyper-local approach:** This is a programme strength in terms of securing community involvement at a meaningful and manageable level – engaging people who are passionate about where they live and want to make it 'even better'. The hyper local nature of Big Local can be a challenge though, e.g. with regard to power and influence where there are several tiers of government and a far away county council base.

A big thank you to residents and organisations in the 15 case study areas:
 Barrowcliff, Scarborough
 Birchfield, Birmingham
 Bountagu, Enfield
 Catton Grove, Norwich
 Grassland Hasmoor, Chesterfield and N.E. Derbyshire
 Growing Together, Northampton
 Hanwell, Ealing
 Lawrence Weston, Bristol
 Northfleet, Kent
 Radstock and Westfield, Somerset
 Ramsey, Cambridgeshire
 Revoe, Blackpool
 Three Parishes, Shropshire
 Westfield, Sheffield
 Whitley Bay, North Tyneside

About the Third Sector Research Centre

The third sector provides support and services to millions of people. Whether providing front-line services, making policy or campaigning for change, good quality research is vital for organisations to achieve the best possible impact. The Third Sector Research Centre exists to develop the evidence base on, for and with the third sector in the UK. Working closely with practitioners, policy-makers and other academics, TSRC is undertaking and reviewing research, and making this research widely available. The Centre works in collaboration with the third sector, ensuring its research reflects the realities of those working within it, and helping to build the sector's capacity to use and conduct research. There are currently 145 working and shorter briefing papers on the [TSRC website](#) addressing critical issues in the voluntary and community sectors.

Third Sector Research Centre, Department of Social Policy, Sociology and Criminology
University of Birmingham, Birmingham, B15 2TT
Tel: 0121 415 8561

www.tsrc.ac.uk

Contact the authors

Angus McCabe

Tel: 0121 415 8561

Email: a.j.mccabe@bham.ac.uk

Mandy Wilson

Email: Mandy.wilson7@virginmedia.com



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons [Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](#).

© TSRC 2020