

Third Sector Research Centre

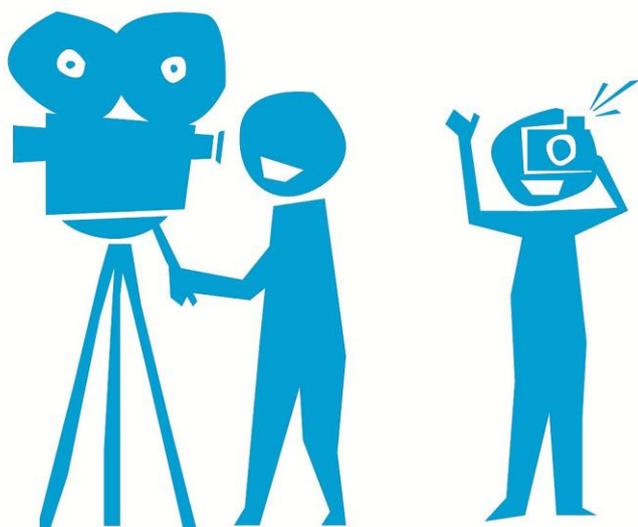
**Our Bigger Story: The First Chapter**  
**Big Local First Interim Evaluation Summary Report**

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Many thanks go to the Big Local  
areas involved:

**Barrowcliff, Birchfield,  
Blackpool Revue, Bountagu,  
Catton Grove, Grassland  
Hasmoor, Growing Together,  
Hanwell, Lawrence Weston,  
North Northfleet,  
Radstock and Westfield,  
Ramsey Million, Three Parishes,  
Westfield, Whitley Bay**



## Our Bigger Story: The First Chapter

Our Bigger Story is a long term evaluation of Big Local, from 2015 to 2026. The evaluation uses film, podcasting and other media to record learning, progress and additional insight from fifteen Big Local areas. This is the first of a continuing series of reports and summaries. If you are viewing a digital version of this document, you can click the hyperlinks included throughout to view related videos and media from the areas.

### Big Local: Some Common Themes

At the heart of Big Local is the value of 'resident-led' development. The understanding that 'one size does not fit all', and support for different approaches, are real strengths of the programme. The Big Local areas taking part in 'Our Bigger Story' involve a wide variety of approaches in terms of how they consult and engage with residents, what partnership and working group structures are in place to oversee the work, the focus of their activities (on longer term plans, specific issues, or building a sense of community) and the ways in which the plans are actually implemented.

Big Local areas are very different, in the issues they are trying to address, how they are tackling them and in terms of their partnership arrangements. For all the diversity of the areas involved in Our Bigger Story, there are a number of common themes and issues arising in Big Local plans, such as a focus on [environmental improvements](#), services for [children and young people](#), **employment, health and wellbeing, crime and community safety**. Within this a whole range of 'sub-themes' emerge: promoting community identity and pride through [heritage development](#), building skills, knowledge and confidence, combating social isolation, especially amongst older people, and developing business and social enterprise.

Here we look at some of **the achievements and challenges** of the Big Local programme to date:

### Residents better able to identify, prioritise and act on what needs to change

All Big Local areas have been through a process of creating a community profile and gathering [residents' views](#), their [visions and aspirations](#) for their areas to help [inform their plans](#). In some areas this has worked well, though in others there has been less overlap between needs and wants e.g. partnerships have been keen to respond positively to resident 'wishes' when, in reality, the 'need' might not have been there. This highlights the value of [reviewing plans](#), and subsequent changes being made: *There is one project to do with transport within the area, which has not worked so well, principally because, .... people told us, that they would really like help in getting about ..., and in fact that wasn't the case. The appetite actually wasn't there....*

Sometimes, issues and suggested solutions simply do not get the 'votes' of enough people. Addressing the more 'tricky' and deeper issues in poorer communities is difficult: *We need to get better at addressing the underlying problems in the area rather than just providing services.* In addition, residents may have a shared understanding of what the key issues are in their community, but differ fundamentally on how to respond. For example, in one area where there is agreement that drugs and alcohol are issues, there is a divergence of opinion on whether the answer is to 'get those people out of here' or provide treatment and support. Similarly, with children and young people, there are those who aim to [empower young people](#) and those who want to blame them.

*There is a challenge in understanding what people mean – for example more things for young people to do ... There is a big difference between needs and wants and we need to nail this.*

## Making a difference in Big Local areas: a better place to live

*The making the place a better place to live is just happening everywhere... there is the obvious things like people taking more pride in their community, people being aware that they can make a difference and knowing that .....they can actually go to Big Local and say, "This bothers me. I'd like to do something about it" and get the support to do something about it. And that's just massive in terms of making it a better place to live.*

### Changes in the community:

The greatest change people talk about is an intangible cultural change - a **new belief** that things could, and would, happen in their areas.

'Bringing back community spirit' is a familiar aspiration across all the Big Local partnerships, promoted through, for example, galas, open days, [community fairs](#) and family events.

People talk about making **new friends** and having more **confidence** as a result of their involvement in the Big Local partnerships, e.g. a resident has successfully stood as a local councillor through involvement with Big Local. Even a small scale initiative can make a difference to the quality of people's lives: *I moved [here] about 5 years ago and really did not know anyone. The [group] gets you out of yourself and it's a place I feel fine in bringing the children. I'm the youngest one here so I've learned a lot of local history.....The group is a real hub for finding out about what is happening in the village.....It's friendly here.*

[Volunteering opportunities](#) are important, but so are jobs and increased employment opportunities are a theme in many plans. To some extent, access to work may be enhanced through the personal development journeys of individuals involved in Big Local, and some innovative services have also been created with the express intent of getting more people into work.

*There has been a change here just in the last year. People seem to be more ... involved and less wary. I think it is because people have been around for a while .....and in the past things just came and went.*

*Doing it voluntarily has changed my outlook.*

*Big Local has helped activate some new people – fired up those who wouldn't have got involved in existing structures.*

*Big Local is much more than I expected. I've got more from this than I ever imagined. .... I've produced a newsletter and I'm the secretary and I've never done this before, never taken minutes, so it's a learning curve.....I'm treated (now) as worthy of being involved and get listened to.*

A number of areas have focused on distributing **small grants** in the early years of their work. They show that small grants can make a substantial difference to individuals and local groups. This self-help approach may also contribute to sustaining the activities in the longer term. But in addition they have a strategic benefit as a way of making Big Local visible and understood in the community.

*We are not trying to change the whole world, we are focusing on small, quite small, but big impact projects.'*

#### **The difference Big Local is making to local groups:**

One partnership has helped sustain activities in the local church which were threatened with closure and facilitated the development of new groups. Elsewhere Big Local areas are supporting local heritage sites not only to improve existing activities but also to develop [sustainable business models](#) through increased visitor numbers – and create a sense of community pride.

*If it was not for Big Local you could not get the extra help you need at a time when groups are really struggling for funding.*

Free access to community buildings is supporting the development of new groups and initiatives e.g. youth activities, older people's groups and local foodbanks.

In a number of areas there are larger-scale, ['whole community' initiatives](#). A practical example of this is energy efficiency and fuel poverty work in Lawrence Weston. Other examples include visible, physical and environmental improvements of varying scale: from hanging baskets and planters, to play spaces, new [community hubs](#), community owned housing and a supermarket.

#### **Making a difference: power and Influence**

There are many examples of how, over time, important relationships are being built and Big Local areas are building the foundations for influence. Relationships between partnerships and local authorities are varied. There is evidence of some very effective linkages with local 'power holders', for example, where the status and funding associated with Big Local shows that partnerships are 'a serious player' in discussions about major planning developments. Conversely, partnerships created by the Big Local programme can feel threatening to long-established local structures, particularly to the smallest council bodies such as parish and town councils.

There are many examples of how local authorities have been very helpful to the delivery of Big Local plans. These include covering maintenance contracts for buildings or play areas funded by Big Local: *... wouldn't be here without their support.* Relationships work best where there is a common agenda around a particular development or project. Yet deliberations can still take a long time, especially where planning regulations and council legal teams are involved. There are several examples of where Big Local areas have been unable to meet their planned timescale because of council procedures getting in the way. Public spending cuts were also seen as a factor in the time taken to deliver, particularly capital projects, because of reduced staffing to process applications. This can lead to frustrations around *'nothing .... happening.'*

## The future: 'It's not about the money, money, money'

Different approaches have been taken to issues of sustainability and legacy. Interviewees talked about the long term future in terms of:

- legacy: leaving behind [substantial facilities](#) (e.g. play parks, self-financing heritage attractions and improved green spaces),
- supporting other, constituted, community groups to take on the management of assets,
- the locally trusted organisation becoming, effectively, a potential successor body to the Big Local way of working,
- a minority of partnerships are looking to formalise and become, at this stage, legal entities and, therefore, successor bodies to Big Local,
- supporting the development of social enterprise, with [UnLtd support](#), as a potential route towards a sustainable local economy, with local social enterprises delivering services within the community,
- drawing external agencies into the Big Local area which, given levels of need, could remain active, with alternative funding, after the programme, and
- the potential to evolve into a neighbourhood management model: co-ordinating services and governance at the hyper-local level.

In addition to physical legacies, Big Local areas, particularly those delivering mainly through small grants or via volunteers, referred to a 'soft' legacy. This includes support to build skills, knowledge and confidence leading to more, and therefore sustainable, levels of community activity, with grass roots groups better equipped to attract other sources of funding – or be sustained solely by voluntary action.

*'The key (to building sustainability) is building buy in, self help and the confidence to achieve'*

## Key Learning: Balancing acts

The variety of governance arrangements, focus and approaches are a response to the local context, specific stories of development and the past experiences, knowledge and personalities of those actively involved, including supporters such as Big Local reps, paid workers, and the locally trusted organisation. This variation reflects the fact that within the Big Local programme there are number of balancing acts that partnerships navigate:

*Strong characters can draw others in, but also put off others....*

- **Freedoms and flexibilities, and clear advice**

Partnership members identify the core strengths of Big local as being resident-led and the flexibilities afforded in Local Trust guidance: the absence of prescribed work programmes or approaches to delivery, the long-term time frame, the lack of numerical targets or annual spend patterns. Those flexibilities,

*It's not about ticking boxes, it's not about providing stats to politicians to back up claims they've made. It's genuinely about local people having the ability to make differences...*

however, are not universally welcomed. Some participants would like clear advice, more boundaries, and a straighter path to follow.

- **Community needs and community wants**

The time allowed for, and resource allocated to, initial community profiling and plan development was appreciated as different to other funding regimes with time limited consultation and short time-scales for bid preparation. However, the process raised a number of questions about whether the views expressed by those consulted are reflective of actual needs, or what people thought others needed and to what extent partnerships are addressing the more hidden, and underlying, problems in their communities.

- **Long term development and short term delivery**

The resident-led nature of Big Local was also seen as contributing in some cases to a slower than anticipated pace of development. Residents are very conscious that they need to be seen (by other residents) to get things right but also that they need to show (other residents) something tangible. A slow lead in time though does have the longer term potential benefit of building community ownership of plans and activities.

*The challenge is that strategic work takes time and residents do not see change happening quickly and can get frustrated...so low level activity is as important as the strategic.*

- **Widening involvement and managing complexity**

Local Trust has always encouraged a creative and, to some extent, an informal process that allows anyone to participate, regardless of particular skills and knowledge. A majority of the areas have, however, adopted traditional approaches to meetings, planning processes and community consultation. Reasons for this may be the pressures partnerships felt in terms of transparency and accountability, but also a feeling that, to do things 'properly', they should replicate the formal structures they see elsewhere. Some of the plan review meetings have had a more participatory style; for example they have been facilitated and incorporated small group discussions rather than chaired around one big table, but this does not appear to be the norm for Big Local meetings.

- **Passions and connections**

There is a lot of passion amongst those actively involved in Big Local, people with an emotional commitment to the locality. This brings its own challenges. This commitment and the sense of ownership that people develop, mean that any disagreement amongst partnership members can be taken very personally. And this can have more lasting consequences when the differences of opinion are amongst friends and neighbours in a small area.

*The difficulties come out of a positive. There are amazing people involved, very committed, and passionate and care .....The downside is that they all want to play a leading role and that has caused conflict*

- **Hyper local and outward looking?**

The relatively small population covered by each area, and therefore the hyper-local aspect of Big Local, is viewed as a key strength. However, some worry that Big Local areas become inward looking and do not see 'the bigger picture'. Furthermore, there can be tensions between those advocating for

their 'pet projects', rather than viewing Big Local as a holistic change mechanism. For those that had engaged with training and Spring Events, Local Trust played an important role in helping residents see that bigger picture.

- **Delivering what's needed or filling in for cuts?**

Big Local areas can be under pressure, from within the community, to use their resources to 'substitute' for cuts to local authority services – in particular play and youth provision.

## Key Learning: A Big Ask?

Perhaps the biggest challenge for the Big Local approach is that it is a 'big ask' of local residents. This applies in terms of time commitments, particularly where partnerships have been drawn in to operational management and monitoring as well as fulfilling strategic roles. The 'big ask', however, is more complex than time pressure. As a resident-led initiative, tensions and conflict in Big Local areas can be between friends and near neighbours. Residents take their responsibilities very seriously and this creates a pressure to 'deliver' which can weigh heavily on partnership members. Residents active on partnerships talk of this being a steep 'learning curve' – particularly in the transition from plan development to delivery. This could be a positive experience in terms of building personal confidence and developing new skills and knowledge. It can also be very demanding and technical: finding out about planning permissions, tendering processes, asset transfer and Pre Qualifying Questionnaires to take on the management of local services.

*A million pounds over 10 years is canny but it takes an awful lot of energy from an awful lot of people.*

*There have been power struggles between some residents.... There is a lot of passion and excitement. But in meetings when things are delayed or not going to plan that can spill over into anger and frustration.*

Issues of multiple activism and multiple roles were identified as a challenge in some areas. Individuals are not only active on the partnership, but may also be volunteers with Big Local (and other) services, elected council members or carrying out paid roles in the local community.

Partnerships are also concerned about levels of participation in decision making and how to 'refresh' themselves through attracting new, active, members. There is often a reliance on a small core group to drive forward plans and activities. Resident members are very aware of the dangers of that reliance: What happens if key members leave? How are their skills and knowledge replaced? If partnership membership does not change, is there the risk that plans, however they are refreshed, become 'stale' and outdated over time? Alternatively, how do you keep people engaged over a 10 year programme?

Further, whilst Local Trust encourages areas to try out new ideas, residents are very aware of the 'risks' of potential failure: to personal reputations and to their standing within the community.

Finally, a recurrent theme is that the Big Local approach requires a change in the mind-set of active residents – and the wider community: *Big Local is asset based community development – building local capacity to respond to local needs – but it's a big step.*

## Third Sector Research Centre

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.

Our Bigger Story, the multi-media evaluation of Big Local, is a collaboration between the Third Sector Research Centre, University of Birmingham, Creative Media, Mandy Wilson Ltd. and Paul Morgans, film maker.

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## Big Local

Big Local is an exciting opportunity for residents in 150 areas around England to use at least £1m each to make a lasting and positive difference to their communities. Big Local brings together all the local talent, ambitions, skills and energy from individuals, groups and organisations who want to make their area an even better place to live and develop the skills and knowledge of local residents. It is a long term approach to change: Big Local areas have up to 15 years to spend their money. The programme is funded by the Big Lottery Fund and managed by Local Trust.

## Local Trust

Local Trust supports residents and communities to create positive change. They believe those in the community know best about what is needed in the places where they live, work and socialise, and are the most likely to come up with solutions to make a lasting difference.

[www.localtrust.org.uk](http://www.localtrust.org.uk)

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