

# Summary

**Big Local** is a long-term resident-led programme which provides resources and support to 150 communities across England. Each of the 150 areas can access guidance and receives support from Local Trust, and has been allocated £1.15m to use in ways that they think will create change in their communities. **Our Bigger Story** is a longitudinal multi-media evaluation, charting the stories of change in 15 different Big Local areas to draw learning about the programme as a whole.

This report follows a series of evaluation papers and is focused on 2020, a year in which the pandemic disrupted accepted ways of working and interrupted Big Local plans and aspirations. The COVID-19 pandemic has tested the strength and resourcefulness of communities. The Big Local programme has continued throughout the crisis, which has provided perhaps a demanding test of the [Local Trust 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”*.

Over the course of 2020, the long-term multi-media evaluation of Big Local, Our Bigger Story, adjusted its research strategy to follow developments in the 15 Our Bigger Story study areas, linked to a parallel Local Trust research study examining [community responses to COVID-19](#)<sup>1</sup>. Based on over 250 interviews, primarily conducted online, and a virtual learning workshop bringing the study areas together, this report outlines how Big Local areas have responded to, and been affected by, the pandemic, chronicles progress in the 15 areas, and looks at what is next for Big Local partnerships in terms of achieving their goals and creating a lasting legacy. The main messages are:

## **COVID-19 has dominated the thinking, plans and activities of the Big Local study areas.**

As with many community groups and voluntary organisations, Big Local partnerships have had to stop many projects and services, respond quickly

to immediate emergency needs, such as food distribution and translating government guidance, and adapt some activities where possible by moving online. Many partnerships have been more proactive and outward facing in engaging residents, have built stronger connections with other agencies and have identified new priorities ahead.

## **The 15 Big Local partnerships are all still functioning and are continuing with long term plans.**

Indeed, the ability of Big Local partnerships to retain some community governance during the crisis of COVID-19 has been remarkable. Many are adapting to meet new challenges emerging from the changing needs of communities as the crisis goes on and social and economic inequalities deepen. For some this will mean a shift in focus, for many it will require flexible ways of working to accommodate ‘a new normal’ and renewed efforts to build supportive relationships at community level.

## **The Big Local model of resident-led change**

has been tested by the pandemic and will be put through its paces as the programme moves into its final years. The crisis has enabled some Big Local partnerships to reach more residents, providing the potential for broader involvement and representation on Big Local partnerships. This will be important as some partnership members who have given their all over the last nine years or so are ready to take a step back. Big Local is about building agency at community level - the power to decide, act and organise. The aim is for people in Big Local communities to gain a strong belief in themselves as agents for change, to bring in new people and diverse voices, and to work with others to make change happen. The evaluation team is hopeful that the value of long-term funding will be illustrated by a legacy of some kind across all Big Local areas. It is in the nature of Big Local that these legacies will be different. At this point in time they appear to centre

---

1. This research is based on learning from 26 study areas; 21 of these are Big Local communities

on: a community building; a robust organisation committed to lasting change; a community where more people are active and engaged; an ethos and culture that preserves resident-led change.

COVID-19 has shown that **Big Local funding and support has enabled residents to make a difference** when it mattered most in stepping up to support their communities. It is striking that Big Local partnerships have managed to sustain and adapt their responses to the pandemic as it has evolved. The value of long term and flexible funding has been integral to sustaining activity in the short to medium term. Indeed, some Big Local partnerships appear to have really come into their own in 2020. Big Local predated the crisis, has been working through it and will continue as the crisis fades. As Big Local partnerships prepare for the final stages of the programme, the task for the future is well stated by one Big Local partnership member:

*“During COVID we got into managing the crisis and having to deliver services. The challenge for the future is getting back to our vision of community building”.*