

# Building on Local Learning about Big Local in 2020

Our Bigger Story: The longitudinal multimedia  
evaluation of the Big Local programme

**Big Local** is a resident-led funding programme providing people in 150 areas in England with £1.15m each to spend across 10–15 years to create lasting change in their neighbourhoods. The programme is run by place-based funder Local Trust, who believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of local communities, to enable them to transform and improve their lives and the places they live.

**Our Bigger Story** is a longitudinal multi-media evaluation that runs alongside Big Local, charting the stories of change in 15 different Big Local areas to draw learning about the programme as a whole. 2020 was the sixth year of the evaluation process. Previous reports, along with photos and films to illustrate the journeys of Big Local partnerships are available on a dedicated [website](#).

### **Dedication and acknowledgements**

*Building on Local* is dedicated to everyone in Big Local areas who have responded to the needs of their communities with energy and commitment throughout COVID-19 and kept alive the vision of creating better places to live. Thanks go in particular to all those who have generously given their time to contribute to the Our Bigger Story research in difficult circumstances. We also remember those people who have sadly passed away this year. We hope the current report does justice to everyone's commitment over the years.

### **Big Local study areas:**

- Barrowcliff
- Birchfield
- Blackpool Revoe (referred to as Revoe in this report)
- Bountagu (Bounces-Montagu)
- Catton Grove
- Grassland Hasmoor
- Growing Together (Northampton East)
- Hanwell, Copley Close
- Lawrence Weston
- Northfleet North
- Radstock and Westfield
- Ramsey
- Three Parishes
- Westfield Estate
- Whitley Bay

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# 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 on:

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

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”.*

# 1. Introduction

## Learning about Big Local in 2020

In a normal year Our Bigger Story would have explored and reported on the progress of the Big Local programme, through in-depth research visits and filming in 15 case study areas. 2020, however, has not been a normal year. The crisis of COVID-19 has tested the strength and resourcefulness of communities and severely impacted on planned activities. Indeed, for Big Local, the pandemic has, in many ways, been 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*'.

Herein lies the advantage of undertaking a longitudinal evaluation of the programme. Rather than providing a snapshot of immediate responses to the pandemic, the research is able to take the long view. The evaluation began in 2015 and thus this paper is able to draw on some five years of previous engagement with, and learning from, the 15 Big Local areas involved as well as explore how the current crisis might inform the future direction and focus of the initiative.

The last Our Bigger Story report, [Big Local as a Change Agent](#) (McCabe et al, 2020a) was published in February 2020, based upon learning from research over 2017-19. This paper draws on insights over the last year (January to December 2020) as part of the ongoing contribution to Local Trust's overarching research strategy which focuses on the importance of place-based funding, the central role of residents in driving change at the hyper-local level, and making a positive and lasting difference in communities. However, as noted at an Our Bigger Story workshop held in November 2020, it is very hard to think of anything other than COVID-19 and its impact on Big Local partnerships and their communities at the present time. This report is, therefore, situated within the uncertain but rapidly changing context of a continuing global pandemic.

The following sections of the current report explore:

- Big Local areas pre-COVID-19 (Section 2)
- The impact of the pandemic on Big Local areas; in terms of Big Local responses at a community level, community involvement and new learning and relationships that have developed as a result of the pandemic (section 3)
- Where Big Local areas are now; the extent to which Big Local partnerships have continued with existing plans despite COVID-19 (Section 4)
- What is next for Big Local areas; evidence of how the Big Local ethos of resident led change is progressing and being embedded within Big Local communities, and the extent to which COVID-19 has tested assumptions underpinning the programme – that long term, flexible funding and light touch support are integral to affecting resident led change (section 5)

The report concludes with questions around the legacy of the Big Local programme and the support that may be required over the short to medium term. These insights, in turn, will inform future research activity into how Big Local areas can contribute not only to addressing the ongoing crisis but also play a part in tackling the social and economic impacts of COVID-19 in the longer term.

## 2. Where we were: Big Local before COVID-19

The previous Our Bigger Story evaluation report, which explored the concept of [Big Local as Change Agent](#), was published in February 2020. This was just as the full force of COVID-19 globally was becoming apparent – and immediately prior to the first lockdowns in the UK. The report summarised key learning from across the 15 Big Local areas involved in the evaluation at an important mid-point in the programme’s evolution. As such it aimed to provide a focal point both to reflect back on learning and development over some eight years since the programme began, but also look to the challenges facing Big Local in the coming years and the move towards areas ‘spending out’ and planning their legacy.

The report suggested that:

**Change associated with Big Local is multi-faceted.** Using a wide range of approaches and interventions, Big Local partnerships bring about change at different levels – from change for individuals and local groups to the wider community. Big Local also involves significant convening and coordinating powers that have the potential to create lasting change at community level, although the impact on higher level strategic developments is less developed at this stage in the programme.

**Big Local mobilises a range of actors,** resources and approaches to create change: active local residents and partnership members, volunteers, specialist paid workers, support from Big Local reps and Locally Trusted Organisations (LTOs)<sup>2</sup>, and other agencies created or engaged to coordinate and deliver activities. In many Big Local areas, particularly those without a history of community development and action, engaging the wider community in decision making remains challenging.

Further, **resident-led change faces significant challenges** and dilemmas. Some of these relate, internally, to the way partnerships operate – and the personalities involved. Perhaps more important, however, there appears to be a limited understanding of, and scope for, influencing key strategic decision-makers whose policies are developed at a much broader, local authority or regional scale – but which still impact on the much smaller Big Local communities.

The report concluded that: “*The Big Local model provides significant resources for resident-led action...*” but “*the support and resources available to Big Local areas are just a starting point for bringing about resident-led change*”.

In some ways ‘Big Local as Change Agent’ can be seen as an evaluation report from a very different world. Indeed, it can be read almost with some nostalgia for a pre-COVID-19 time of physical presence in community spaces: discussing the importance of maximising the use of community hubs and events to bring diverse groups together and maximising face to face opportunities to build community engagement. Section 3 below looks at what has changed and identifies new learning that has emerged from the impact of, and responses to, the pandemic.

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<sup>2</sup> Big Local reps are Individuals appointed by Local Trust to offer tailored support to a Big Local area and share successes, challenges and news with the organisation. 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 locally trusted organisation depending on the plan and the skills and resources required.

### 3. The impact of COVID-19 on Big Local areas

In one sense the pandemic has changed just about everything for Big Local partnerships – the ways they work, and the contexts in which they operate. They have had to stop many activities, in particular those which would normally be held face to face. They have had to adapt some services by moving them online and they have engaged in new fields of action (Burbidge 2020). Despite this, partnerships have maintained effective decision-making mechanisms and continued to advance existing and forward plans. Further, the pandemic has highlighted, and made more visible, pre-existing inequalities within and between communities. Interviewees from across all 15 areas repeatedly noted the increasing levels of:

- Food and fuel poverty
- Vulnerable employment
- Social isolation across age groups
- Digital exclusion
- Mental distress and illness
- Poor quality environment and infrastructure

The extent to which the surfacing of these issues is informing Big Local legacy plans and legacy statements is explored in Section 4 of this report.

#### 3.1 Big Local responses to COVID-19

'Stronger than anyone thought' (McCabe et al 2020c), based on the direct study of community responses to COVID-19, argued that whilst there has been one pandemic there have been many responses to the crisis. This complexity, specifically, is reflected in the activities of the 15 study areas engaged in the Our Bigger Story longitudinal research.

At the beginning of the first lockdown in March 2020, the majority of partnerships became involved, very quickly, in the distribution of goods and related supplies in response to immediate and emergency needs<sup>3</sup>. How they did so, however, varied. Some, like Barrowcliff and Birchfield for example, engaged directly in the provision and distribution of emergency aid, while many others, including Lawrence Weston, Ramsey, Westfield and Hanwell, worked in partnership with established foodbanks and/or emerging mutual aid groups. The scale of the challenges that Big Local communities faced cannot be underestimated. For example, based on a comparison of 1 January-22 March, and 23 March-30 June, the average number of parcels given out by the foodbank in Westfield increased by 195% and the number of people provided for in those parcels increased by 300%.

Some Big Local partnerships took time to reflect and subsequently focused action on vulnerable groups not covered by central and local government support schemes or voluntary sector emergency measures. The approach taken by partnerships ranged from meeting the needs of vulnerable families (for example, Barrowcliff paid for school meal vouchers for families just above the free school meals threshold, and Radstock and Westfield supported the provision of baby clothes and toiletries to families), through to highly targeted interventions such as offering hot meals to homeless people living in bed and breakfast hotels (as undertaken in Whitley Bay). In each instance, local knowledge, built up over the years, played an integral role:

*"We're in a prime position for this; we know the families that need support, we know the individuals that need the additional finances, because they haven't got any, so we can help them with food bank. And we literally sat and worked out what it is that we think people might need. And as the weeks have gone on, we've just adapted it each week to suit what everyone needs at the moment."*  
(Ramsey resident and community worker).

As noted, some partnerships delivered emergency food parcels themselves. In other areas, such as Revoe and Westfield, a Big Local worker was seconded to the local foodbank. Others commissioned services using Big Local funding or used small grant schemes to support community-based initiatives, such as the provision of PPE in, for example, Three Parishes and Catton Grove. A more co-ordinating role was played by other Big Local partnerships, acting as a broker between statutory provision, mutual aid groups and local communities, for example, in Hanwell. A key element here is the demonstration by partnerships of community leadership:

*The board have been the driving force throughout COVID. This is what Big Local is all about. Showing the community what can be done, not just in ordinary circumstances, but in extraordinary circumstances*

(Big Local chair).

A consistent and important role played by Big Local partnerships throughout the pandemic has been taking generic central and local government information and adapting this to the local context – either through Big Local websites, social media feeds or leaflet distribution to every household in the area (for example in Three Parishes). The flexibilities afforded by Big Local programme funding, however, also enabled partnerships to adapt their responses as the pandemic evolved. Whilst some maintained food deliveries well beyond the initial lockdown, others focused on the provision of activities to promote health and wellbeing. This has included:

- Organising socially distanced events, for example for VE Day and Halloween
- Offering or funding counselling and related mental health interventions
- Facilitating arts and creative responses, including pop up events, distributing activity and ‘goodie’ packs and street art with positive messages
- Moving activities online, such as youth provision coffee mornings and knit and natter groups

- Improving the local environment and organising local walking trails
- Putting on safe trips out
- Purchasing tablets and other IT equipment to combat social isolation and support young people’s education
- Frequent wellbeing calls to volunteers and those who would have attended face to face activities

As the first lockdown was eased during June 2020, some Big Local partnerships continued with their immediate response activities. Others stopped them, only to pick them up again when the second lockdown was introduced in November 2020. In fact, several areas have seen spikes in contacts and the level of demand for activities as different restrictions have come into force.

Not all such interventions were equally in such high demand. One area, for example, reported young people struggling to engage with online youth provision. Two Big Local partnerships purchased tablets for loan in the community, but had very little take-up; in another area a telephone helpline remained unused. In some Big Local areas the number of volunteers coming forward to deliver food exceeded demand, and as a result they remained underused.

Across the country, many of the more informal community responses to the immediate crisis in March declined over time as people returned to work from furlough. Some community groups lost funding and either ceased to exist, curtailed or limited their services (BVSC 2020, Groundwork 2020). Yet what is striking is that Big Local partnerships have managed to sustain and adapt their responses to the pandemic as it has evolved. Here again 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. Partnerships have welcomed something practical to focus on and have used the resources available to them to make a substantial difference in their community at a time when people needed it most.

### 3.2 Greater community involvement

Despite successive lockdowns and other restrictions, people from Big Local areas participating in an online Our Bigger Story workshop in November 2020 talked about their efforts to bring people together, to meet immediate and new needs and bring new people in. They commented that people have stepped up and stood together in order to get through the pandemic. They stressed the importance of emotional, as much as practical, support (Unwin 2018). This chimes with the findings from Local Trust's partnership survey across all 150 areas (2020 partnership members survey, Local Trust, unpublished) which found that 78% of respondents felt their Big Local was able to respond quickly to local needs during the pandemic, and 77% believed they had supported more people than usual during the pandemic. In the same survey, 42% of respondents thought their Big Local had seen an increase in volunteers.

Some of the 15 Big Local partnerships have capitalised on the upsurge in community spirit and new volunteers coming forward during the pandemic. One Big Local noted that volunteers have loved what they have been doing and the relationships they have made and have said they do not want to stop. In Ramsey, support has been provided to find new and different ways to keep volunteers on board, either in practical support roles such as helping with activities or in community governance roles such as joining a trustee board for a local charity.

Engagement has been more outward facing and proactive this year. Outreach work and door-knocking has increased substantially, in part because community centres had to close. In some areas this has been very successful in meeting new residents and identifying previously unknown needs. Revoe reached over a thousand people through doorstep conversations and this work will now continue beyond the pandemic:

*"As a result of COVID [we] did a door knocking exercise and [it was] a real success, knocked on every door, spoken to over 1100 people and handed out 110 food parcels, donated 6 washing*

*machines. Decided to do something proactive and turned out well. Most have said can contact us again and willing to be involved"*  
(Big Local worker).

In Birchfield, cultural events and activities organised with Creative Civic Change<sup>4</sup> have animated people in the community at a time when there was little else to do and brought Big Local into contact with new people and groups – in particular Roma and Refugees. These events contributed to residents taking the initiative to clean up a communal garden area. Bountagu Big Local organised door to door deliveries and street stalls to distribute sanitiser and face masks alongside the promotion of small community grants. Together these outreach activities have attracted new partnership members and new volunteers.

### 3.3 Getting on with Big Local business

At the same time as partnerships have been busy responding to immediate local needs, most have managed to maintain core decision making processes. In this, they have also been able to reflect on their position in the community and to take some big decisions.

The majority of areas have kept their partnership and working groups functioning through virtual meetings. This has revealed both opportunities and challenges. With support and encouragement from Local Trust, most hold their meetings through Zoom, which has proved to be very successful in the main. Those who had neither the equipment nor much technical knowledge prior to COVID-19 often became enthusiastic early adopters of online activity, enabling partnerships to function throughout two lockdowns and other restrictions. A worker in one Big Local area described how partnership members "*were slow to come to Zoom ... then recognised it was the only way to keep the partnership going. But now, which is good, they are running online classes themselves as volunteers, [as part of the Big Local programme]*" (Big Local worker).

<sup>4</sup> Creative Civic Change (CCC) is delivered by Local Trust, National Lottery Community Fund, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. It is modelled on the Big Local programme and offers flexible, long-term funding, and learning support to 15 communities across England to develop arts based community engagement.

There are, however, downsides to the use of Zoom or other internet-based platforms. For example, some people were not interested in using online technology and have thereby removed themselves from a direct governance role. By the end of 2020, a number of partnership members were ‘feeling very tired of Zoom’ and reducing levels of online activity. Still others found that, whilst the technology aided decision making in terms of agreeing tasks, it was less effective at managing disputes or for conflict resolution where normally “*you can take someone aside and talk things through over a cup of tea*” (Partnership member). The very practical issue of poor Wi-Fi connections in many communities often arises: one Big Local chair talked of someone having to climb a ladder outside his house to obtain a workable signal.

In the Local Trust commissioned research around community responses to COVID-19, one respondent noted how lockdown had provided an opportunity to reflect more broadly on the role of Big Local in their area. Others have used the time to work through long drawn-out processes and negotiations to make significant decisions and move forward on key projects. This has been seen in Lawrence Weston, for example, with its community energy project, and in Grassland Hasmoor with the establishment of its new Locally Trusted Organisation (LTO) and finalising proposals for a new building. During this period Ramsey has successfully applied for a £300,000 grant for a new community facility, tendered for the building work and established appropriate management structures. This ability to continue to get on with significant programme tasks, including partnership and staff recruitment, is testimony to the strong relationships and sense of purpose built prior to March 2020:

*“When you deal with a crisis you kind of then start to see what’s really important and I think it’s allowed us to do that”*  
(Big Local chair).

There have of course been frustrations and challenges. Maintaining resident led structures without any face-to-face opportunities to meet has been difficult for some Big Local partnerships, especially where there were contentious

issues to discuss. In addition, some Big Local partnerships have struggled to operate their small grants schemes; many are now carrying an underspend against their pre-COVID-19 plans; and some partnership members feel they have not done enough in their community (through no fault of their own, such as being forced into self-isolation). Many, however, are looking to the future and identifying new needs and priorities, directly as a result of their experiences in 2020.

### 3.4 New knowledge and changed priorities

COVID-19 has shone a spotlight on the extent of poverty, digital exclusion, social isolation and the fragility of mental health in communities. Along with many other agencies and organisations, several Big Local partnerships have been shocked by what has been revealed. As one LTO officer stated, “*It’s actually the people you don’t know that you are most worried about*” and went on to say that “*you suddenly realise what you don’t do*”. Similarly, the chair of another Big Local commented that “*I feel like the Big Local has actually never been more necessary because the demographic of the town is obviously going to change ... and in the next six months we’ll only see more and more of the effects of this... I think our ways of working will be different*”.

Partnerships are reviewing their Big Local plans to assess whether they need to change or add new priorities. Whitley Bay Big Local, for example, is looking to continue building a closer relationship with homeless people and to develop food projects. Some areas that were due to submit a plan in 2020 have amended draft plans in the light of their experience of COVID-19. The Catton Grove Big Local plan, which was 90% drafted prior to the pandemic, has been amended to include financial and digital exclusion as priority issues for the area. In Barrowcliff, the timescale for consultation around themes for their new plan was extended and a temporary short-term plan was submitted instead. New themes are emerging in areas where new plans need to be prepared for 2021 onwards: “*we didn’t really talk about health and wellbeing in the past and now need priorities about around these, whether it’s physical*

*or mental*" (partnership member). That being said, in another area partnership members are finding planning for 2021 onwards a challenge because of current uncertainties. One Big Local talked about having just put a plan in place, submitted to Local Trust before March, with expectations about what they would do. And then suddenly, everything changed which "*caused a spanner in the works*".

Most of the 15 Our Bigger Story areas either have their own community hub or are in the process of developing one. They see this as integral to serving community needs and the achievement of their vision. Others have access to a local community centre from which they run weekly activities. In some places, community hubs have more than proved their value as food hubs during the pandemic; but others have been closed for most, or all, of the time since March 2020.

Several partnerships adapted quickly and shifted their activities outside (at least in the summer months) or online or to the doorstep. Greater emphasis has been placed on outreach work and the use of public spaces to bring people together – through pop-up events in parks, holding outdoor meetings – or using 'doorstep conversations' to maintain and build relationships. Youth work has been moved online or has shifted from centre-based provision to detached work. Further, closures of buildings, even when temporary, have encouraged new learning and ways of operating:

*"Just because you have (a hub) does not mean people will come to it"*

(partnership member).

Accordingly, some partnerships are reflecting on the future balance between centre-based work and emerging outreach models of community engagement. Reflecting on their lack of access to buildings this year, some Big Local partnerships now acknowledge that a lot of energy went in to running community venues and have realised that "*Big Local is bigger than the building*" (partnership member).

The closure of community hubs has also challenged assumptions that underpinned sustainability strategies – namely that hiring out space in the building would continue to generate income. Even where centres reopened, treading the line between encouraging people back and staying COVID-19-safe has been tricky and reduced the numbers of people allowed in for activities. Despite support from local authority grants in some places, a number of centres are now facing financial deficits. Planning for those hubs that are still in development needs to take a new account of designing in COVID-19 security. Just one community building seems to have benefited financially from the impact of COVID-19 – capitalising on the fact that other centres are closed and attracting new rental income from local support groups and charities as a result:

*"Right now the building is really serving its purpose: Know we are doing something right"*  
(Big Local worker).

### 3.5 Relationships with other organisations

In some areas, working relationships with local authorities and other voluntary and community organisations have been enhanced as a result of joint responses to the crisis. For example, Ramsey Big Local, and its LTO Ramsey Neighbourhood Trust, are now firmly on the map and trusted to step up and support their community by the Town Council, the District Council and the district's voluntary sector infrastructure body. Frequent coordination meetings between these agencies have resulted in stronger and closer working relationships. A Big Local worker reflected that "[it has] *taken us this long to get to the table, and ... will continue beyond 2023*".

In several areas however, the pandemic has exposed previously poor relationships. In one Big Local area, the response at community level was primarily a joint effort between the local authority and the county wide voluntary sector infrastructure body. No specific contact was made

with the Big Local in this area. A partnership member commented that those directing the local response did not seem to want small organisations springing up and offering support. They felt that it was strange they had not been approached to be involved, as the flexibility of Big Local funding makes them unique in this situation. While recognising that agencies needed to get response efforts in place quickly once the lockdown was announced and that there was not a lot of time for involving community-led bodies in the decisions that needed to be made, a partnership member from another Big Local reflected that, “*it’s that balance isn’t it of how we then give space for community input in that*”.

The frustration about a lack of recognition of the opportunities a Big Local brings to an area, or any real strategic influence, remains common to many partnerships: “*We have to push into those spheres still, I don’t think we’re invited*” (partnership member). This situation has been further evidenced and discussed in the previous Our Bigger Story paper, [Outside In](#) (McCabe et al, 2018c).

The strength of pre-existing relationships between Big Local partnerships and other agencies has also been highlighted with LTOs. In Ramsey and Lawrence Weston for example, the Big Local relationship with the LTO was already very close and the response was very much a joint effort. In others, the pandemic has cemented stronger relationships, such as in Catton Grove. One Big Local which had been struggling in its relationship with the LTO prior to COVID-19, however, found that lockdown appeared to lead to an even more controlling accountable body. The LTO became more risk averse and tried to prevent the partnership from responding in ways which they felt appropriate, for example in delivering detached youth work and using their building as a response hub.

### 3.6 The role of Big Local workers

All 15 Our Bigger Story partnerships have selected to invest in paid support. These workers may provide a variety of functions from project management to development to administration, and are usually employed by, or contracted to, the LTO. In some areas, partnerships have also commissioned projects which themselves have paid staff. In many areas these workers have played leading roles in the community responses to the crisis. Indeed, there are several areas where there would not have been a response at any scale without them, especially where older partnership members were shielding and were unable to offer direct support. In two cases, workers have been seconded to overstretched foodbanks. Workers have also distributed information to the community through leaflets, newsletters and social media; have supported people to use online platforms for meetings and activities; have recruited and supported volunteers; have identified and responded to the needs of the most vulnerable in the pandemic; and they have skilfully built effective working relationships with other agencies. In one area, where only a few partnership members were willing to attend online meetings, the worker kept others on board through posting meeting papers out and collecting pre- and post-meeting opinions through doorstep conversations which have then been fed in to inform partnership decisions.

It is decisions by partnership members and access to Big Local money that has resulted in the employment of Big Local managers, community workers and administrators. This investment has paid dividends in 2020.

## 4. Where we are now

### 4.1 Keeping going

All 15 Big Local partnerships in the Our Bigger Story study have proved both to themselves as well as to others that they can be flexible and responsive when emergency needs arise, and that they can continue to make a difference whatever the circumstances.

#### **Box 1: Keeping going: examples of activity during 2020**

##### **Barrowcliff**

Barrowcliff, in the light of COVID-19, submitted a temporary one-year plan and intends to consult again over the next few months to design a new plan for 2021-23. It has developed stronger relationships with local organisations and provided financial support to enable them to deliver activities which are supporting the community during this time of crisis.

##### **Birchfield**

Birchfield has been meeting fortnightly and commissioned local enterprises to offer a range of health-related activities. It sees its job club as a key project over the next 18 months or so. The Creative Civic Change programme has enabled Big Local to build new relationships with more diverse communities.

##### **Bountagu**

Bountagu recruited new partnership members and volunteers, has a new chair, and has renewed interest in its environmental projects and small grants. The Small Ideas Fund has really taken off this year with lots of people coming forward to make a difference in their community. It has held Saturday strategy meetings to inform its new plan in 2021.

##### **Catton Grove**

Catton Grove has worked closely with its LTO to support the local community during the crisis and has provided informal online meeting opportunities for local groups to

Despite lockdowns and other restrictions, all have continued to meet and make decisions, and all have either directly delivered or commissioned activities. Examples can be found across all 15 study areas.

build relationships. Its draft plan was almost ready to go but was revised to take account of emerging issues. It is planning additional community engagement work from 2021.

##### **Grassland Hasmoor**

Grassland Hasmoor held its annual partnership elections, established its own LTO, moved into a new community hub and has submitted plans for its biggest project – a park pavilion building. The Open Spaces working group now has 150 volunteers and has calculated that the voluntary time donated to improving green spaces equates to £400,000.

##### **Growing Together**

Growing Together has held a development day to plan for the future, held community gardening events as an opportunity to engage with local residents, and is planning more outreach work in 2021. The support provided in previous years to the Silhouette Project ensured it had “*the financial planning, mentality and skills to be ahead of the game*” (Silhouette Artistic Director) when COVID-19 hit.

##### **Hanwell**

Hanwell is reviewing projects for 2021 in the light of continued restrictions and will adjust delivery plans based on this. In the meantime the partnership is continuing its online activities, including the provision of remote support for vulnerable young people, and has come up with ideas for potential activities to keep people

engaged and less isolated. A survey to gauge interest in the ideas was carried out and Big Local is piloting some of them e.g. online creative writing, bath bomb making, cooking, quiz nights.

### **Lawrence Weston**

Lawrence Weston has continued to focus on making its longer-term visions happen, to build a community wind turbine which will generate community energy and income post-Big Local, and to create a community-led housing scheme. It has strengthened relationships with other agencies and its crisis response has raised its profile and reputation.

### **Northfleet**

Northfleet has been in discussion with Ebbsfleet Development Corporation around possible designs for a new community hub which could replace its previous, and now closed, community space. It intends to submit a new Big Local plan in early 2021.

### **Radstock and Westfield**

Radstock and Westfield is, as planned, funding community space in the new GP Surgery for which building work has commenced. It is working with local schools around environmental projects and is exploring future income generation strategies. These will help to inform its new Big Local plan in 2021.

### **Ramsey**

Ramsey has begun formalising closer links with its LTO, Ramsey Neighbourhood Trust, as a precursor to a future merger. It successfully applied for over £300,000 to start work on a new community hub in the summer. It has much stronger working relationships with the Town, District and County Councils as well as district wide voluntary sector infrastructure.

These 15 areas are at varying stages of their Big Local journeys and evidently doing different things in different ways, but they are all still there and functioning, albeit to varying extents. What they all have in common is that they have all played a part in supporting their communities over the last year in very trying circumstances.

### **Revoe**

Revoe, where its role as a facilitator and enabler in the community has increased the level of activity and the number of community activities has grown. Doorstep outreach work in 2020 has raised the profile of Big Local and generated new interest, as well as more information about the local community and its needs. It has worked on strengthening its partnership and intends to have a new Big Local plan in place in 2021.

### **Three Parishes**

Three Parishes has created a new Big Local plan. It continues to fund welfare rights and debt advice and has recently teamed up with a local social enterprise to offer support for local social enterprise development and to residents who are struggling to find work as a result of the pandemic.

### **Westfield**

Westfield has worked with a number of groups and agencies to finalise plans for a new playground. It has recruited new partnership members and begun a listening project with residents. It intends to review its Big Local plan in 2021.

### **Whitley Bay**

Whitley Bay has recruited new members and a new member of staff. It has made the most of its community building during 2020 and has been in negotiations about its purchase. It has held several meetings to develop a clearer vision and strategy in part informed by work developed during lockdowns, and aims to submit a new Big Local plan in 2021.

As outlined in a Local Trust briefing paper, communities have demonstrated just how resourceful they can be, particularly when they have been funded and supported to build knowledge, skills, relationships and infrastructure over a number of years as is the case with Big Local partnerships (McCabe et al, 2020b).

## 4.2 The emergence of deep issues

As the pandemic unfolded, the majority of Big Local partnerships shifted the emphasis of their response from crisis intervention, in particular food distribution, to proactive and positive activities for local residents such as photographic competitions, online quizzes and creativity packs. For some areas, however, emergency support was ramped up as poverty deepened and Christmas drew nearer. Those interviewed gave multiple examples of people who:

- Had periods of no electricity and therefore no lighting, heating or cooking facilities.
- Lived in damp and disrepair prior to COVID-19, with housing conditions further deteriorating over the year.
- Had just one donated tablet to assist with homework for a family of six children.
- Had no smartphone, or even a basic mobile phone and were therefore unable to order repeat prescriptions (even where they had serious medical conditions), sign on for benefits digitally or submit evidence of job seeking (which resulted in sanctions by the Department of Work and Pensions).
- Had never used a foodbank pre-COVID-19, but were now reliant on their services.
- Became homeless due to family breakdown or domestic violence during the pandemic and where even if successful in securing accommodation, lacked the resources to purchase basic furniture, bedding and white goods, let alone afford running costs.

Some Big Local partnerships have expressed a sense of despondency, feeling that change is “*out of our hands*” (partnership member). In some, energy levels appear to be running down:

*“Now I think we are tired. No-one expected this (COVID-19) to go on so long. No, not tired. When you are tired you rest and recharge your batteries. We can’t do that, but I’d say people are really weary”* (partnership member, December 2020).

## 4.3 New learning

As Big Local areas start to surface from the immediate crisis of lockdowns and restrictions, they face, and will continue to face, serious issues within their communities, in particular around increased unemployment, mental ill health and educational attainment. Indeed, as noted, what has emerged is the sheer scale of poverty facing residents in Big Local communities. Things have therefore changed, challenges are more acute, and will not return to the situation pre-COVID-19 in the foreseeable future. However, Big Local partnerships have also changed. One Big Local worker talked about how they had learnt more about how community works and what does not work. They have discovered more about what works in relationships with partners, in project development and delivery, and in finances and communications: *“A learning curve over the last year. Need to adapt and change and do things differently. Agreed a new five year plan but need to remember nothing is fixed”*.

Another Big Local worker commented:

*“One of the things that I hope we’ll be able to say at the end of this, and by that I mean when all the restrictions on social distancing are lifted, is that even if we didn’t engage with as many people as we would have liked during this we’ll at least have a story to tell people and to say, ‘This is what we did do, by the way, during the lockdown, this is what we managed to achieve, and we touched X number of people, and we’re still here and we’ll be doing more now that everything is allowed to happen again”*.

In short then, whilst some partnerships have been hyper-active in their emergency responses, the pandemic has also provided opportunities for reflection, to try out new approaches, and learn from these in ways that mean they will not simply revert to some pre-COVID-19 state or way of doing things. The principles underpinning Big Local, such as being led by the community and residents having some control over their destiny, still provide partnerships with enough vision and motivation to sustain some level of energy and continue to identify local needs and plan accordingly.

As one partnership chair said:

*"It is our job is to help people have the vision  
that the community can enable things to happen  
that they want to happen. And that's simply  
what to me Big Local is about - catching and  
spreading that vision, and when they've caught  
it, amazing things do happen"*  
(partnership chair).

# 5. What is next?

2021 is likely to be another testing year. Further COVID-19 related restrictions will continue to be in place affecting the resumption of face to face and particularly centre based activities. The signs are that poverty is spreading and deepening in these communities and elsewhere. In September 2020 the Trussell Trust found that half of the people using one of its foodbanks had never needed one before and forecast that it would need a 61% increase in food parcels across its UK network between October and December (Trussell Trust, 2020). Evidence from the Our Bigger Story areas backs up this trend with most of the 15 Big Local partnerships delivering food parcels for families on a regular basis, or at least during the school holidays in 2020 and in the run up to Christmas, and they do not see this ending anytime soon.

## 5.1 Impact on Big Local activity

As described above, some partnerships are trying to deliver Big Local plans which were designed before the pandemic, and several are in the process of drafting plans for 2021 onwards. For some this will be their final plan in the programme. Whatever stage they have reached, Big Local partnerships will need to adapt to changing circumstances and use their new knowledge and awareness of community needs gained during the pandemic to inform future strategies. It is likely that:

- **The focus** of what is important will shift. Already there are Big Local areas that have refocused priorities and refined plans. For example, Three Parishes has sharpened its focus around health and wellbeing and welfare rights, while Catton Grove has changed its focus around digital exclusion, financial advice and support. Other areas, such as Barrowcliff, are waiting to see what happens and will seek to reflect needs as they arise over the coming few months. For some, the local economy has always been the key focus and the pandemic has confirmed the relevance of priorities set in previous plans; for example,

Birchfield in relation to welfare rights advice, and Lawrence Weston in terms of creating affordable energy to address fuel poverty.

- **Ways of working** will also change. Online platforms such as Zoom and WhatsApp have revolutionised operating methods for many, although they have not worked for everyone. Several Big Local partnerships are talking about hybrid models of partnership meetings for example – holding a mix of face to face and online get-togethers as a way of creating greater accessibility and involvement. Similarly some Big Local areas, such as Whitley Bay, may continue a dual approach to activity sessions – holding both online and face to face knit and natter groups. One Big Local worker expressed how liberating it was to be able to negotiate building developments with specialist professionals such as lawyers and architects by Zoom rather than having to pay for long distance travel and associated time. Most partnerships that have a community hub are keen to reopen and restart activities, but there is, in part as a result of the experience of 2020, a much greater confidence to reach out to people beyond those attending centre-based activities.
- Some partnerships will find themselves **picking up the threads** from matters which were left unresolved during periods of highly restricted activity. Zoom may have enabled most decision-making processes to continue, but it does not allow for the relationship building that comes from an informal chat before a meeting or a cup of tea afterwards, and has made induction and support for new members more challenging. It will also be important to review checks and balances in leadership and decision making. Examples include the dynamics between partnership members and paid workers, especially where through necessity workers have been the driving force during the COVID-19 response, and where conflicts of interest in the partnership have not been fully addressed.

- Big Local partnerships will need to confront the **sheer scale of the challenges** ahead – mental health issues, rising unemployment and the longer-term damage to the economy. This has raised questions for some partnerships on the most appropriate size of a Big Local area in the face of broader social, economic and environmental challenges. Throughout the pandemic the value of hyper-local knowledge has been stressed as a key asset of Big Local in terms of speed and sensitivity of crisis responses. However, partnerships have often been bypassed in terms of wider strategic decision making, being considered too small to play a significant role. Indeed, this has contributed to some Big Local areas, such as Birchfield and Northfleet, planning to mirror the geographical boundaries of, respectively, the local authority ward and the parliamentary constituency. Growing Together is also looking to broaden its catchment area in order to encompass an adjacent housing estate which seems to make more sense locally.

## 5.2 Progressing the Big Local model

Big Local partnerships have faced their own particular trials in the face of the pandemic – whether in terms of supporting people through personal challenges, managing community spaces, transitioning from face-to-face to online engagement or enabling communities to be part of the response. There are three interrelated themes which have been made more explicit by the pandemic and which raise broader issues for the Big Local model of resident led change: first, broad-based community engagement; second, community governance and accountability; and third, resident-led change and power dynamics.

### Broad based community engagement

Across all 150 Big Local areas, the majority of partnership respondents identify community engagement as a huge challenge (2020 partnership members' survey, Local Trust, unpublished). 94% say they want more people involved and 64% believe that they rely on too small a group of individuals. The early findings from the partnership survey also tell us that

73% of partnership respondents are over 45, 25% are retired and just 5% are under 29 years of age, and that most are women, white, and post-secondary educated. These figures are unsurprising as they resonate with UK wide surveys of volunteers (NCVO 2020) and with views from Our Bigger Story participants who have long noted that levels of engagement is an ongoing issue (McCabe et al 2017).

Many existing partnership members have now been involved for several years and are getting older. Some of the people active in Big Local were already retired when the programme started, have given a lot during its course, and would now like to take a step back. There is a concern that succession is likely to prove extremely challenging – there seems to be a lack of people coming up as potential replacements. The consequence of this will be a decline in momentum and a slowdown in activity. COVID-19 has made this problem more visible and brought it to the fore. Some key figures in Big Local partnerships have had to shield and felt less in touch with activities and developments. Equally, when it came to the crunch – stepping up to provide a response to the crisis – some areas found that people with the experience, skills and understanding to provide some community leadership were few and far between.

During the pandemic, additional effort and resource has been dedicated to enhancing broader community engagement – through, for example, doorstep conversations. There are ways in which COVID-19 has made those conversations easier, as “*we are offering something practical – like a foodbank referral – at the door*” (partnership member). In other areas workers and partnership members have commented on the opportunities for new contacts and relationships – particularly, for example, with younger, furloughed, workers. What is not yet known, however, is whether those new conversations and contacts will convert to wider representation on Big Local partnerships and/or other forms of dispersed community leadership.

Indeed, in some instances, there may have been missed opportunities to build on those new contacts and support greater community

involvement. For example, in one community, some local residents took the initiative to clear communal garden spaces so that they would have safe places to come together. But rather than build on this activity, the partnership then commissioned a landscape gardener to plant and site garden furniture in the public space. One partnership member commented critically “*if you want to build people’s confidence, would it not have been better to just give them some money to buy plants and equipment and just let them get on with it?*”.

The creation of greater community agency as a continuing legacy in Big Local areas remains challenging (McCabe et al 2018a). On the one hand, partnership members say they would like more people involved. On the other, the Big Local vision is often owned and held by a very small group of people who may get rather defensive when new members ask questions or have different ideas. In addition, the Local Trust offer of support to learn and develop new skills and knowledge, including leadership, is in practice usually only available to those already on the partnership or in a paid role (and often the same few people), and the learning is rarely shared with the wider community.

### **Community governance and accountability**

The ability of Big Local partnerships to retain some community governance during the crisis of COVID-19 has been remarkable. As discussed above, some partnerships have made big decisions over the last year with full involvement of partnership members. Local Trust support and encouragement in the use of Zoom, through access to free Zoom accounts, written guidance, one to one sessions and group workshops, have made a significant difference to their ability to operate. There have been some ups and downs but there is evidence that some partnerships have used the technology well and gone beyond functional decision-making to prepare their longer-term plans and legacy statements. Bountagu Big Local, for example, has held ‘stay-in’ days (as opposed to away days).

Intrinsically linked to such engagement however, is the extent to which COVID-19 appears to have accelerated a process of concentrating Big Local

decision-making in a small number of hands. In some areas, partnership decision making has been replaced by what is effectively a very small group. Some partnerships were struggling to make meetings quorate before the pandemic and this situation has become more acute over the year. In others, power and responsibility has shifted to paid workers, with partnership members trusting that “*they can let the worker get on with it*” (Partnership member) not only on a day-to-day basis but also in terms of forward planning. In others the Rep or the LTO has played a substantially more pro-active, or potentially dominant, role.

Current modes of operation may be pragmatic in the midst of a crisis, yet they raise longer term issues of sustainability and question the Big Local vision of resident led and dispersed community leadership creating change. If, for example, Big Local has become synonymous with a relatively small group of individuals (and often professionals/workers), will there be any visible legacy around community agency beyond the current programme and its support and funding?

### **Legacy structures**

The type and structure of legacy body that Big Local partnerships are establishing will be significant. Most of the 15 areas have set up a structure through which Big Local can continue, or are in the process of setting one up. Some partnerships face implications of charitable status, such as who is eligible to be a trustee or director, and a concern that “*the moment they become a CIO [Charitable Incorporated Organisation] they will dance to the tune of the Charity Commission*” (Big Local rep). Another Big Local rep commented that:

*“There is a danger that rather than being a neighbourhood group led by its residents, Big Local partnerships become more a charity and social enterprise.”*

Big Local partnerships also need to take decisions about whether the partnership members and the board of directors are effectively the same group of people, or whether they are completely separate structures. Both of these approaches can be seen across the 15 Our Bigger Story areas, as can the model of merging Big Local

with an existing neighbourhood body, which is sometimes the current LTO. Local Trust is currently designing guidance around legacy structures and it may be that in the light of this, some partnerships will review organisational forms that have been established, or at least their memorandum and articles of association, with regard to accountability, and community asset locks where buildings are involved.

At present, there appear to be five emerging approaches seen amongst the study areas as partnerships look towards their legacy:

- No direct legacy body currently planned
- Formation of a Community Interest Company (CIC)
- Formation of a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) with a foundation model
- Formation of a CIO with an association model
- Merger with another established organisation, usually a charitable company

To some extent, when an organisation is growing as a charity and formulating appropriate policies, there is a pull towards formality. In addition, the structure adopted may well impact on the way in which organisations can fundraise in the future and on the spirit of Big Local's resident-led ethos. For example, the formation of a Community Interest Company (CIC) may limit fundraising potential as they are not registered charities (even if they have charitable objects) and not eligible for tax relief. Moreover, some concerns are surfacing that membership and accountability could be compromised by the CIO foundation model where voting members are its charity trustees rather than a broader voting membership as in the association model.

Discussions around organisational structure and what is needed in a particular place can be healthy and fruitful. One partnership member felt that the bigger objective is *how* they run themselves and noted the value of bringing together those who are “*really passionate about community representation [with] those who have charitable experience*

*and can help us grow and be sustainable ... A tug of war and that is a good place to be.” This member was, however, also concerned about becoming tokenistic and more formalised.*

Incorporation was not part of the original vision of the Big Local programme, but it perhaps became inevitable as Big Local partnerships secured assets and explored alternative funding. It raises the question of whether the formality associated with incorporation by necessity thwarts community representation and engagement, and whether this might be a fundamental tension at the core of the programme? Our Bigger Story will continue to follow this theme over the next two years as it is something that challenges the programme but is also interesting to Big Local partnerships in and beyond Our Bigger Story. One participant at the Our Bigger Story workshop (November 2020) spoke quite animatedly about incorporation as a line of inquiry: how is this developing and has it been successful? How to make the right choice? Is it the right thing to do and/or is it costing more than it is worth? How does incorporation ‘fit’ with the broader vision of Big Local as developing residents’ agency and capacity to affect change –as opposed to more narrowly defined organisational development?

### **Resident-led change and power dynamics**

The power of residents to act and change their neighbourhoods and villages for the better underpins Big Local. This was eloquently summarised by a partnership member:

*“We’re so used to having somebody who’s paid by the town hall or some authority parachuted into your area to tell you how you live. People now say I now feel that if I have an idea I could take it to Big Local. We all live in the area ... there’s nothing like the people who live next door. You’re all experts by where you live, you know, your area ... And that’s what makes Big Local strong”.*

The extent to which residents are leading change is an ongoing discussion in and around the programme - see, for example, McCabe et al (2018a; 2020a). Similarly, in its inquiry into resident-led decision making and action,

Local Trust examined different types of power, including power dynamics within communities (Local Trust, 2020), and in the 2019 [Our Bigger Story animation](#) (Big Local Voices: Reflections on change and power), Big Local partnership members and workers expressed their thoughts, and concerns, about who leads change:

*"What we have to be careful of is that it isn't those who shout the loudest who become the most influential. A very careful balancing act is required!"*

*"There are some people though who haven't been that involved, and feel on the outside. I am worried that they see us as a clique".*

*"I think it is true to say that several members of the partnership do have considerable power within the group...me being one of them. This is largely due to the longevity of our connection with the project and our commitment to it".*

These were interesting reflections because they illustrated the challenges inherent in building agency at community level. We have discussed above how the power to be informed, to make decisions, and to act can easily slide into becoming the preserve of a small number of residents who "know the rules of the game" (Big Local partnership member). For example, some residents may find partnership meetings too formal, procedurally bound, and therefore exclusive and modelled on pre-existing, and often alien, models of decision making (such as the committee structures of local authorities, Town and Parish Councils or large voluntary organisations). In others, power and influence are always and inevitably subject to dispute between individuals and groups – over, for example, who can claim 'legitimacy' and who is 'representative' of the community.

Building participatory democracy is, and always has been, challenging – particularly in communities with little history of activism before Big Local. Creating equity within and between the often competing voices at community level is even more challenging. This is something that partnerships are frequently acutely aware of, and, to their

credit, continue to struggle with and address in terms of engaging diverse community voices and building dispersed community leadership (McCabe et al 2018b). Likewise, the question of how communities can create dispersed and non-dominating forms of power (Pierce 2012, VeneKlasen et al, 2007), rather than reproducing existing models of dominating power will be the subject of further evaluation inquiry.

### 5.3 Endings and new beginnings

Big Local partnerships are gearing up for the final stage of their part in the programme. Success at the local level will be seen in the extent to which Big Local partnerships have used their money and support to make a difference and contributed to an even better place to live<sup>5</sup>. At a programme level success is demonstrated by evidence 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*". The Our Bigger Story evaluation is concerned with what makes for success, as well as achievement of outcomes such as 'making a difference to where you live'. For example, the extent to which a Big Local is genuinely resident led, how agency has been created and generated, the characteristics of what makes a good Big Local worker, the significance or not of relationships with councils that facilitate rather than control activities and direction. This will include a focus on Big Local areas that feel they have struggled with making much of an obvious difference, why this might be and whether there is scope for reimagining the Big Local approach in such situations.

In the 15 Our Bigger Story areas, 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. We anticipate that these legacies will be different, and some will be more visible than others. By the end of 2020, these appear to be:

- a community building or hub
- an organisation committed to lasting change

<sup>4</sup> These are two of the four Big Local programme broad 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.

- a community where more people are engaged and active and more things are happening, and/or
- an ethos and culture that preserves resident-led change.

The evaluation has repeatedly mentioned the extended and relatively relaxed programme timescale as helping to facilitate its effectiveness. Time, however, is now starting to run down. Returning to the learning in the Big Local as Change Agent report (McCabe et al, 2020a), it is still the case that resident-led change faces significant challenges, dilemmas and support needs, some of which are new. There are areas where support is needed which have come about because of the stage of the programme, and some which have arisen or been highlighted through experience of the pandemic and its impact on communities. Potential support required from Local Trust includes:

- **Keeping up morale:** most of 2020 has been a very testing time and, as quoted above, people are weary. The next few months could be very hard as easing restrictions and restarting activities takes longer and is more difficult than anticipated. The online learning networks provided by Local Trust over the last nine months have proved to be popular but they may run out of steam as energy wanes. Our Bigger Story participants have said that they miss the informal aspects and the fun bits of face to face learning events. Local Trust might explore some opportunities for hosting spaces which sustain the Big Local community, are informal and primarily fun, and perhaps nothing to do with Big Local at all.

- **Continued and continuous community engagement:** The big push at the very start of the Big Local programme attracted a wide range of partnership members and others who wanted to ‘do things’ in their communities. In some areas such as Grassland Hasmoor, efforts to involve more people have ensured a healthy turnover of partnership members and many more volunteers, whilst still retaining inaugural members and their knowledge and skills. In most other areas, the

pool of active people has stayed pretty constant. This must be considered a success in that most people have stayed the course and developed their understanding of the community and experience of making things happen. As time goes on however, some people are tired and want to step back. Some of the seasoned Big Local movers and shakers who were perhaps newly retired and with some time on their hands in 2012 are now feeling they would like to do a little less. Ways to reach out, engage and involve more people is an ongoing area for support, perhaps best delivered by the Big Local Reps.

- **Governance and accountability:** many Big Local areas are setting up legacy structures. They require not just information about the form these might take but opportunities to discuss with others how they operate in practice and how those a bit further down the line are maintaining their resident-led ethos and ensuring accountability to the wider community.
- **LTO functions:** as more Big Local areas consider taking on the LTO role, an understanding of what it means to be an LTO would be helpful. With the best of intentions, some LTOs have done more than they were paid for which has not helped Big Local partnerships always understand the roles and responsibilities and costs involved.
- **Sustaining community buildings:** assumptions about income generation through room hire and events can no longer be taken for granted in the way they were before COVID-19, and some partnerships are facing deficit budgets this year due to loss of earnings. Business planning support would be helpful to ensure that there is a realistic understanding of cash flow forecasting, grant applications and income generating enterprise.
- **Struggling areas:** there is a need to rethink what is best for areas that feel they are struggling. This may involve Local Trust deepening engagement with such areas to offer additional support and/or facilitating a network of such areas to share ideas about different models of working that can make some contribution to the aims of Big Local, however ‘off-programme’ these might be.

- **Relationships with strategic agencies:** some key learning during the pandemic has been that community responses often require a greater degree of partnership working than perhaps in non-emergency situations. There have been missed opportunities on ‘both sides of the equation’, from formal and statutory bodies, and from active community responses (Gaventa, 2004; McCabe et al, 2020c). Such partnerships will become even more important as challenges of unemployment and mental health, for example, become more acute in the coming year. These deeper and ongoing concerns will require services and resources from the local authority but also some resident input into their relevance in different communities, alongside appropriate community-led provision. Local Trust could potentially help build relationships by working with ‘both sides of the equation’ and brokering specific relationships where requested.

The Big Local programme and its investment in 150 communities over the last eight years has ensured that, at least as witnessed in the 15 Our Bigger Story study areas, residents were able to make a difference when it mattered most. In every one of the 15 areas, Big Local partnerships have used their resources to support their communities during the pandemic. They have stopped or paused some activities, adjusted some, and developed new ones. Many of these new interventions have been service oriented, such as delivering food parcels funding for foodbanks or commissioning family support. We are told that nationally the outpouring of community spirit is starting to dwindle (Pro Bono Economics, 2020<sup>6</sup>), evidenced by the much lower numbers of people active in the second lockdown compared to the first. Partnerships are well placed to confront this shift – they have supported people to be active in their community and garnered volunteers, they have built strong connections and they have raised awareness of what people can do when they come together and have the opportunity to manage their own resources. Local Trust has a role in helping partnerships to recognise and celebrate their achievements as well as supporting them to focus on the aims of the programme.

As a Big Local partnership member noted:

*“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”.*

<sup>6</sup> PBE reported that 6 million fewer people in England volunteered or supported their neighbours during the second lockdown compared with the first

# Appendix A: Research Methods

## Approach

Phase Three of Our Bigger Story (OBS), the longitudinal multimedia evaluation of Big Local, commenced in January 2020. At this point there was a detailed research plan which included scheduled visits across the 15 OBS areas to interview stakeholders, observation sessions at partnership meetings and the filming of events and other activities in each area. In addition, initial plans were in place to recruit participants to keep reflective diaries, take part in ‘Listening Project’ style audio-conversations and develop photo-elicitation albums to capture reflections on the Big Local journey in words and pictures.

Case study visits started, as planned, in February – and then came COVID-19. At the start of the first lockdown at the end of March, Local Trust approached the Third Sector Research Centre to undertake a broader research project on [community responses to the pandemic](#). This involved working with the 15 OBS Big Local partnerships and a further 11 communities.

Since April 2020, therefore the OBS evaluation has run in parallel with the community responses to COVID-19 work. With lockdowns and social distancing requirements over the year, a radical rethink of the research methods was required: case study visits, filming and a residential workshop were no longer possible.

## Gathering of information

In total 259 semi-structured interviews were carried out in OBS case study areas between January and December 2020. These were mostly conducted by Zoom, and were informal and conversational as this was felt to be appropriate in the context of the pandemic, hence they were framed as learning conversations. All conversations were recorded with informed consent and either professionally transcribed or written up by the researcher. The data was then analysed thematically (Butler-Kisber 2018).

Whilst responses to COVID-19 constituted a core element of these OBS interviews they also covered substantial ground integral to understanding the trajectory of the Big Local areas involved in the research on the programme over time. Observation sessions and facilitated discussions at Big Local partnership and sub-group meetings also contributed to this. Themes covered included, for example, partnership functioning, governance, broader community engagement, ongoing (or new) relationships with external agencies as well as forward plans and legacy. It is that OBS specific data that informs this report.

There have, indeed, been certain advantages to using Zoom in the research process. Interviews have been more frequent – at least monthly in the early months of the crisis. Further, they have often been longer and more detailed than is possible during visits to case study areas and new people have become involved in the research through a process of snowballing online. The downside has been not being able to see people in the case study areas ‘in reality’ nor to engage with the wider community at events or resident consultations. Whilst this element of the research plan has ceased, other planned activities have been amended and adapted. A reflective research residential with all 15 areas planned for April 2020 had to be postponed and was replaced with an online workshop, of 28 participants representing all 15 study areas, in November.

## Film making

Filming was also unable to proceed, although three OBS films have been made using a mixture of existing film footage and Zoom interviews. These films include: a record of five years of [work with young people in Ramsey](#), progress against the [community plan in Lawrence Weston](#) and the work of SPARKS, a family support project commissioned by [Barrowcliff Big Local](#). These films have been supplemented by a further nine short videos recording different responses to the pandemic

which have used social media feeds from all OBS areas and included some material from other Big Local areas. These are all available on [YouTube](#) as a visual archive of activity over the past 12 months and have been supplemented by regular updates from areas on the timeline on the [OBS website](#).

## **Thank you**

The research has, therefore, evolved flexibly over the year to reflect the constraints imposed by COVID-19 guidance – and also as a means of remaining sensitive to the other – often increasing – demands on participants' time and energy. It is a tribute to all 15 OBS areas that they have continued to be involved in this research over an extremely difficult year. Partnership members, workers, Reps and other stakeholders have been extremely generous with their time and thoughtful in their contributions. The research team would like to thank them, acknowledge their contributions and hope that the current report does justice to the quality of those contributions and the work they represent.

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