

## SUMMARY REPORT

# A delicate balance: national support provision in the Big Local programme

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

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**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, which believes 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 in which 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. Previous reports, along with photos and films to illustrate the journeys of Big Local partnerships, are available on a dedicated website, [Our Bigger Story](https://www.localtrust.org.uk/our-bigger-story), and films at <https://vimeo.com/manage/showcases/5138370/info>

### 1. Introduction

Big Local involves commitment of money and support to residents in 150 areas across England over 10-15 years. While much attention has been given to the long-term funding and its outcomes, there is far less evaluative research around the accompanying support offer, which has been designed to build the capacity of residents in Big Local areas to take action to improve their communities. There has been a wide range of support mechanisms put in place, including Big Local reps<sup>1</sup>, Locally Trusted Organisations<sup>2</sup> (LTOs), networking and peer support opportunities, training

and consultancy. The overall support package has evolved over time.

This report uses evidence and insight from the Our Bigger Story longitudinal evaluation of Big Local to explore the support made available to Big Local partnerships<sup>3</sup> and residents in Big Local areas, and the difference it is felt to have made to the work and progress in their areas. The report is based on research during 2022 combined with a broader analysis of longitudinal data collected throughout the duration of the Our Bigger Story evaluation (see below for further details).

1 Big Local reps: Individuals appointed by Local Trust to offer tailored support to a Big Local area and share successes, challenges and news with the organisation. These roles ended in 2023, replaced by Big Local Area Advisors.

2 Locally Trusted organisation (LTO): 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 A Big Local partnership is a group made up of at least eight people (of which at least 51% are residents) that guides the overall direction of a Big Local area.

The analysis offered in this paper addresses three questions:

1. What support has been offered in the Big Local programme, and how has it changed as the programme has progressed?
2. What support has been needed and accessed by Big Local areas?
3. What difference has capacity building support made to Big Local areas?

## 2. Supporting community-based action – insights from the literature

It has long been acknowledged that community-based action can often require and benefit from wider support, particularly in communities with either little history of community development or under-developed community infrastructure. The rationale is that targeted and tailored external support can help level the otherwise unequal playing field in enabling communities to engage with community programmes or take a lead in directing community investment. In the UK, community involvement became a growing dimension of a succession of targeted ‘area-based initiatives’ through the 1980s and 1990s, perhaps reaching its high-point in the 1997-2010 Labour government’s regeneration and community participation programmes. Without meaningful community involvement, it was assumed, these programmes would be doomed to failure. And while the question of what that meaningful involvement should actually look like was unresolved, the further assumption was that it would be bolstered by dedicated support to build the capacity of communities to engage. For Duncan and Thomas (2000: 2), community capacity building:

*“involves development work which strengthens the ability of community-based organisations and groups to build their structures, systems, people and skills. This enables them to better define and achieve their objectives and engage in consultation, planning, development and management. It also helps them to take an active and equal role in partnerships with other organisations and agencies”.*

Community capacity building was regarded as the ‘holy grail’ of regeneration (ibid: 7), but also simply as new wine in an old bottle: community development wrapped in a new technocratic language of capacity building (Craig, 2007). Others questioned the deficit emphasis, that targeted communities were defined mostly by what they lacked. An alternative ‘empowerment model’ would draw from the strengths and self-generated priorities of communities themselves (Harrow, 2001). Across the literature there was also recognition of a paradox, that engaging with capacity building support itself requires considerable capacity, leading to the prospect of virtuous and vicious circles: those thought most likely to need support would be unable to access it, while those less in need could readily access support and build their capacity further (Millar and Doherty, 2016).

At the time the government developed its own framework for community capacity building, in which it outlined a set of principles to improve support *“to build the skills, abilities, knowledge and confidence of people and community groups, to enable them to take effective action and play leading roles in the development of their communities”* (Home Office, 2004: 3). The framework promoted the idea of community anchor organisations *“as key agents to promote and support local community development and neighbourhood engagement”* (ibid: 15). But capacity building could be organised in a variety of ways, including direct grants to dedicated support providers, or by facilitating peer support networks. There was a growing interest in residents’ consultancy and the government funded Guide Neighbourhoods programme was established, where communities that had learnt by doing could pass on their knowledge to others (McCabe et al, 2007). Increasingly, programmes also established pools of specialist freelance advisors who could be drawn upon for bespoke support as and when required.

Alongside government initiatives, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation launched its own four-year Neighbourhoods Programme (2003-2006). A ‘light touch’ array of support was offered to 20 neighbourhood groups across the UK, including a dedicated facilitator as a reference point for

support and ideas (deployed for up to 30 days over three years), a small funding pot ('credit', of between £5K-£10K over three years), help with action planning and networking opportunities (Taylor et al, 2007). The learning from this programme, along with parallel work by the Fair Share Trust, which promoted a long-term approach to place-based community investment from 2002-2013 (UKCF, 2013), directly informed the design of Big Local (IVAR, 2013).

As national political priorities moved away from large scale public regeneration and community programmes from 2010 onwards, debates around the nature and organisation of support also shifted. New emphasis was placed on targeting and low-cost support mechanisms, such as digital information and peer support networks. A new framing of 'demand-led' capacity building emerged, shaped by what communities and frontline voluntary organisations and community groups themselves wanted or needed, and reinforced by the language of choice, power, and control (Macmillan, 2013). Funders were interested in channelling capacity building resources directly to local communities and groups, who in turn could arrange and pay for the support they need as consumers from a market of support providers (Walton and Macmillan, 2014).

New approaches to capacity building have raised additional questions and recast others. For example: what role is played by funders and programme designers in deciding what capacity building should be for, and in brokering support? How do existing power dynamics between funders and communities and groups play out when support is added to the mix, i.e., what is the balance between choice and control? These questions and others continue to animate policy and practice on support for communities and the wider voluntary and community sector, and flow through discussions of support in the Big Local programme.

### 3. Big Local and support

The design of the Big Local programme was animated by a guiding 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"* (Local Trust, 2020-2026 research strategy). The most common purpose of direct support to areas has been to enable/facilitate resident-led decision-making. An array of support mechanisms has been put in place from the outset, including in-area support from consultants and organisations, specialist technical expertise on key issues, and a range of networking opportunities. Support through the programme has evolved over time.

#### The support offer

Big Local areas have had the opportunity to engage over time with a variety of different forms of support. Each Big Local partnership has worked with a **Locally Trusted Organisation (LTO)**, responsible for facilitating access to the funding, financial management and accountability of Big Local partnership funds, but in many cases also for employing Big Local workers<sup>4</sup>, delivering activities and services and holding leases on behalf of the unincorporated partnerships. Additionally, the programme has provided in-area support. **Big Local reps** were, until late 2022, individuals appointed by Local Trust to offer tailored support to each area, acting as the 'eyes and ears' of Local Trust and a point of liaison between partnerships and Local Trust. The Big Local rep role was replaced at the start of 2023 with Big Local Area Coordinators<sup>5</sup> (employed by Local Trust) and contracted Big Local Area Advisors<sup>6</sup>.

Beyond these forms of support, Big Local areas have used their Big Local resources to buy in additional support, for example, to add capacity by employing workers or to bring in technical expertise from local professionals and consultants. Local Trust have also provided opportunities for Big Local areas to engage with specific skills development initiatives around, for example, impact measurement, community engagement,

4 Many Big Local partnerships fund workers to support the delivery of Big Local. Big Local workers are paid individuals, as opposed to those who volunteer their time.  
 5 Big Local Area Coordinators are part of the Local Trust Programme Team and are responsible for a portfolio of areas at a sub/regional level. They provide information, advice, and high-quality tailored support, based on need, to enable Big Local areas to deliver locally on their plan priorities and longer-term ambitions.  
 6 Big Local Area Advisors form a specialist pool of people contracted to Local Trust. They deliver specialist and technical assignments to support the partnerships.

communication, and asset ownership, as well as an array of peer learning and networking opportunities.

The support offers have aimed to fulfil a wide range of functions, which can be grouped broadly into six categories: technical expertise; skills development; adding capacity; guidance and information sharing; relationship building; peer support.

Over the course of the programme **three broad phases of support can be identified**. In an early **‘getting started’ phase**, nearly all support offers were outsourced to national partner organisations, many of whom had been involved in the bidding consortium. Often these support offers were universal, one-size-fits-all support, based on their respective areas of interest and expertise. A few years into the life of Big Local, Local Trust adopted a new approach, within a phase of **‘consolidating’ and broadening the support offer**. The role of reps was widened, as was the range of support offers, and there was a growing emphasis on facilitating networking and peer support. Big Local areas could increasingly pick and choose the support they wanted to access. In the programme’s final years, a third ‘spending out’ phase has developed with a more **centrally led, targeted, and differentiated** support offer - ‘Make it Happen’ - designed to assist Big Local areas in delivering

their plans<sup>7</sup> and spending out as the programme draws to a close, with a reconfigured team of Area Coordinators and Area Advisors.

**Support mechanisms and uptake**

From discussions with partnerships and paid workers in the Our Bigger Story Big Local areas, the forms and functions of support that Big Local partnerships talked most positively about were relational: for example; peer learning (through networking opportunities); the critical friend role (played by Big Local reps and others); technical expertise where a relationship was built with the provider.

**Peer learning and networking:** *“It’s about networking and the sharing of that information, which is vital”* (partnership member)

This was important to Big Local areas from the outset, as they looked to find out how other areas were interpreting the programme’s approach and ethos, and how they were doing. Realising that others were ‘in the same boat’ was reassuring for participants, and later cohorts of Big Locals appreciated learning from their forerunners. Opportunities to connect with others has been a significant part of Local Trust’s support provision. In addition to sharing experiences and ideas with peers, these events offer spaces in which ways of

Figure 1: Six functions of support in the Big Local programme



7 Each Big Local partnership is required to produce a plan. It is a strategic guide and action plan that the partnership can follow, share and use to get others involved.

working are reinforced and partnership members feel their work is recognised and celebrated. Networking, however, has not always been perceived as positive; there are some people for whom the networking experience has been disempowering, described by one resident as a “*beauty contest*” where they felt judged as a failing Big Local area.

**Big Local reps:** “[Big Local reps] *kept us and the threads together*” (partnership member)

Reps were a long-term presence in the journeys of partnerships. They acted as advisors and facilitators at the beginning, and become critical friends as the programme developed, providing challenge from a position of experience, knowledge, trust and support. Reps were the face-to-face connecting point for Big Local partnerships with the wider programme, reassuring people and pointing out areas for consideration as necessary. One partnership member talked about the important rep role of providing guidance on compliance with programme requirements: “*telling us what we are doing right*”; another talked about the rep role as helping the partnership “*when we don’t know what we don’t know ... there was a lot of this at the beginning*”. The role of the rep has shifted over time in line with needs of areas as the programme has evolved and increased learning at Local Trust about what was working well, and what less so. For example, alongside a move to provide specialist expertise from national partner organisations, the guidance for reps was changed in 2018 to broaden their role - this included more intensive support to areas that were facing specific partnership challenges - and, over time, their contracts were brought across to Local Trust for a closer management relationship. In 2022, the rep role shifted again and they were appointed as Big Local Area Advisors when Local Trust took the decision to directly employ Big Local Area Coordinators in order to ensure a more direct relationship with Big Local partnerships and provide them some areas with more targeted support.

**Locally Trusted Organisations:** “*Part of us but not part of us*” (partnership member)

LTOs have formed an integral part of the Big Local model since the programme’s early days, as they are the mechanism for getting funding into the Big Local areas. They were intended to hold, look after, and distribute programme funds on behalf of, and at the behest of, Big Local partnerships. As the programme has progressed, many have taken on additional roles as requested by the partnerships, such as employment of Big Local workers, holding leases for Big Local buildings and in some cases delivering projects (Local Trust, 2021a). While some have been praised for the personal and professional support provided to partnerships and workers, other LTOs have been regarded as over-cautious or over-restrictive, offering little support beyond financial management.

**An intermittent need for specific and specialist forms of support:** “*The good thing that Local Trust did was step in*” (partnership member)

Local Trust has commissioned services from a range of specialist providers since the beginning. Some of this assistance has lasted over several years; for example, UnLtd<sup>8</sup> support for social entrepreneurs, and Small Change guidance around financial enterprise and investment. The life cycle of a Big Local partnership is not a linear process. Evidence from the 15 Our Bigger Story case study areas, alongside Local Trust’s own review of its support offer (Local Trust, 2021b), tells us that there have been critical moments when additional and specific support was required (McCabe et al, 2020; 2021a). This may have been, for example, because ambitious plans such as asset development needed specialist technical expertise or because relationships between partnership members had gone awry, necessitating a form of crisis intervention. A number of factors appear to explain the varied take up of support:

8 UnLtd, finds, funds and supports social entrepreneurs and was a Local Trust delivery partner.

Seven considerations come in to play in explaining the varied **take up of support**:

- **Skills and capabilities – different starting points.** Big Local partnerships are not equally experienced, equipped, or comfortable accessing support. Paid Big Local workers, reps and/or a particularly supportive LTO can make a significant difference in guiding and signposting residents to sources of support.
- **Awareness and knowledge about what is on offer.** Some residents and workers are not always aware of what support is available and relevant to them, and information is not always clear about the benefits of support.
- **Perceived relevance of what is on offer.** Support is not always seen to be appropriate, for example, when short-term consultancy is offered but longer-term, hands-on support is thought to be needed.
- **Timing.** As Big Local areas progressed at different rates, the point at which particular forms of specialist support were made available did not always coincide with when it was felt to be needed by some areas – some may have wanted it sooner, others later.
- **Resource.** Accessing support takes time and money, both of which are unequally distributed, which can lead to variable take up. For example, peer learning opportunities are often more suited to partnership members who are retired. Support can be harder to access for people in work or with caring commitments.
- **Interest and confidence in nationally driven support opportunities.** Several Our Bigger Story case study areas note a preference for accessing local support resources above national support offers, in part because of a commitment to promoting local infrastructure, and in part because of doubt whether national provision would understand the local context.

**7. Restrictions and limits:** Some Big Local participants have sought support but been disappointed, for example when workers have not been permitted to access particular offers targeted at residents. This may illustrate a lack of understanding or clarity about the purpose of the support available and its intended participants.

#### 4. The difference that support has made

Earlier reports from the Our Bigger Story evaluation have tested the role of long-term funding in terms of creating positive and lasting change in people and places (see, for example, Wilson et al, 2022 a/b). This has been evidenced, not least, by the substantial physical and environmental developments in a number of areas that would not have been possible without long term monies. Here the focus is on how support has contributed to that overarching goal of hyper-local change, through considering its role in building the capacity and agency of residents.

We have found that support in the Big Local programme has contributed to **five medium- and longer-term outcomes**, which together can be seen as helping to build areas' capacities and capabilities to deliver and benefit from Big Local.

**1. Increased confidence** amongst residents, especially Big Local partnership members that have engaged most directly with support. It was evident in the early years of the programme, through networking events, workshops, and conferences, but also arises through the work of reps and mentoring in the Community Leadership Academy<sup>9</sup>.

**2. Enhanced skills and knowledge**, particularly for partnership members, for example around the requirements of the programme and recommended approaches for tackling common issues. The critical friend approach of reps was valued in this respect, alongside other support offers where guidance is provided by people with a background in working with communities. Informal learning opportunities, such as networking across Big Local areas, were appreciated, helping

<sup>9</sup> Community Leadership Academy (CLA): provides support for the people making change in their communities. It helps them to develop and share skills and knowledge that can benefit the whole community. Created in 2020, it is delivered through a partnership comprising Korea, the Young Foundation and Northern Soul

to spread understandings about what does and doesn't work.

**3. Improved group working and relationship management**, for example through facilitation and mediation by reps on effective team working within partnerships, on relationship management between Big Locals and LTOs, and through the shared experience in networking opportunities of being part of a wider programme.

**4. Direct capacity**, for example the capacity provided in the financial management and employer role played by LTOs. Big Local areas have been freed up to pursue things that they would not otherwise have been able to, such as visioning, engagement and planning. Direct capacity has also been provided both through national support offers, such as UnLtd which worked in areas to generate social entrepreneurship, and through national and locally sourced consultancy support, such as engaging solicitors, lawyers, and planners.

**5. Legacy.** The four outcomes above combine to generate a fifth - longer term change within communities, helping to ensure the legacy of the programme through confident and knowledgeable resident-led structures. Legacy also arises through the contribution of support for the development of physical assets within some OBS areas.

Finally, it is worth noting that Local Trust's relationships with other organisations, as well as its national standing, has opened doors to additional funding, information and influence. One OBS area, for example, suggested that being part of a national programme has given it a profile on which it can continue to capitalise and provided connections to people with influence through particular Local Trust interest and lobby groups.

### Variations in outcomes

The outcomes of support have not been found to be even but varied by offer, community and individual. The considerations which seem important in explaining variation in the outcomes of support across areas include **who determined the need for support; who delivered the support; how the support was provided and who the support**

**reached.** These factors affect the ownership of the need for support, confidence in the quality of support providers and the trusted relationships they can develop with residents, and how support opportunities are shared and learning cascaded.

### 5. A series of balancing acts

We have seen, from the literature and the research undertaken with Big Locals, that national funding programmes which are supporting local activity face a serious and complex dilemma over when, and when not, to intervene to provide support. Broadly speaking there have been two approaches to organising support in the Big Local programme - a **national, programme-organised approach**, and a **locally self-directed approach**. Each addresses, in different ways, the question of who ultimately decides what support needs come to be prioritised and who chooses support providers. There are pros and cons of each approach, for both the funder and the grantee, but also blurred lines and complex considerations in play across the two. For example, a national, programme-directed approach may be informed by intelligence gathered from local experience, and a local, self-directed approach can be informed by national advice and guidance. In Big Local, there has been an opportunity to build on the critical mass of areas to make networking and peer support effective, while at the same time there has been an ongoing challenge for Local Trust of identifying and offering pertinent and accessible support for 150 very different, hyper-local areas.

Alongside this, there is a set of contingent circumstances which affect uptake and outcomes. First, Big Local areas were at **different starting points**, in that some had a lot of existing capability and seemed to require very little external input, some tried to access all the support on offer, and others struggled to know what support would be helpful. Second, **awareness and knowledge** of what support is available varies and makes a difference, particularly in how support is promoted and explained, and the extent to which learning is cascaded. Third, the quality of engagement with potential support offers around **relevance, trust, risk, and value for money** has a bearing on how support is accessed and what difference it

makes. Nationally organised support offers will often be seen as remote and will therefore need an approach which builds a foundation of trust and relevance with local residents.

Five overlapping **tensions and balancing acts** in providing support, alongside funding, in such a large, multi-dimensional programme as Big Local have been identified. The design and operation of any form of community-oriented programme has to navigate these balancing acts with care.

1. A **national-local dimension** with built-in contradictions in a national programme which values local resident-led development; where, on the one hand residents are told that power is in their hands, but on the other the centre plays an important role in deciding what support needs are prioritised.
2. A **dichotomy of risk and control**, which acknowledges that all attempts at resident-led development come with risks, but that a mitigating framework of control is needed to ensure these risks are managed.
3. **Enabling flexibility and ensuring compliance** across the multiple lines of formal and informal accountability in the Big Local programme, which filters through into programme support.
4. The **relationship between supply and demand**, where assumptions about what Big Local areas need and want do not always match actual demand for the support on offer at a particular point in time, given the different starting points and distinct development phases and trajectories of Big Local areas.
5. A difficult balancing act between **expertise and relational support**. Ongoing relationship-based support, such as coaching, mentoring and networking, is highly valued by Big Local partnerships. Technical assistance is more highly valued where the specialist provider builds a relationship with residents, in addition to the expertise they are bringing.

The Big Local programme involves multiple forms of support, and the extent to which individuals, partnerships and the wider community have benefited has varied. Opportunities for face-to-face support have given residents the confidence that they can make a difference locally. Indeed, the quality of the relationship between partnerships and support providers has been as significant as the expertise on offer. Effective support appears to rely on a very flexible approach based on a dynamic and nuanced understanding of what will help where and when, alongside recognition of the significance of human interaction and connection.

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## The research

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. This report draws on all the research done to date, but in particular in focuses on research conducted during 2022 when the Our Bigger Story evaluation worked with Local Trust and the 15 Big Local case study areas to explicitly explore the support offer, how it has changed and what impact it has had. This involved:

- Interviews with 7 Local Trust staff, July-September 2022
- Workshop sessions from a two-day Our Bigger Story residential event in October 2022 involving 32 participants from 14 out of the 15 Big Local areas.
- Individual and small group interviews, March-December 2022, with Big Local partnership members (22), Big Local workers (23), Big Local reps (13), LTOs (8) and other stakeholders (4) in Our Bigger Story areas.
- Facilitated workshop sessions, July-September 2022, in 4 Our Bigger Story partnerships, involving 44 partnership members, residents, LTOs, Big Local workers and Big Local reps.
- Review of literature around funder provided support.