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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July 2023

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 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.

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An Our Bigger Story film, Support in the Big Local programme, accompanies this report

Glossary of Big Local programme terms used in this report

Big Local area(s): neighbourhoods selected by the National Lottery Community Fund to receive at least £1m. Local Trust is working with 150 Big Local areas.

Big Local Area Coordinators: 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.

Big Local Area Advisors: this is a specialist pool of people contracted to Local Trust. They deliver specialist and technical assignments to support the partnerships.

Big Local partnership(s): A Big Local partnership is a group made up of at least eight people that guides the overall direction of a Big Local area.

Big Local worker: 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.

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 2022, replaced by Big Local Area Advisors.

Big Local plan: Each Big Local partnership is required to produce a plan. It is a document they write for themselves, their community and Local Trust. It is a guide and action plan that the partnership can follow, share and use to get others involved.

Learning Clusters: peer learning groups for people wishing to explore a particular topic or skill. Learning clusters were focused around the issues Local Trust had picked up from Big Local partnerships, e.g. coastal communities, housing, being a Big Local chair etc.

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 Koreo, the Young Foundation and Northern Soul.

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.

Summary

Introduction

Big Local involves commitment of money and support over 10-15 years. While much attention has been given to the long-term funding, there is far less understanding of 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, such as Big Local reps, Locally Trusted Organisations and networking opportunities, and the overall 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 and residents in Big Local areas, and the difference it is felt to have made to their work and progress. In addition to a literature review and re-analysis of longitudinal data, the report is based on research during 2022 involving interviews with Local Trust staff, Big Local partnership members, workers and reps, workshop sessions with Big Local partnerships and during a two-day residential event of members from Our Bigger Story evaluation case study areas.

The Big Local programme was designed with learning from similar community-based approaches in mind, including the regeneration programmes associated with the 1997-2010 Labour governments, such as the New Deal for Communities, and targeted grant-funded community programmes such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Neighbourhoods Programme (2003-2006) and the Fair Shares Trust (2002-2013). During this time capacity building aimed to strengthen the structures, systems, knowledge, skills and confidence of communities, and was needed to support their meaningful engagement with regeneration programmes. It could be provided in a variety of ways, such as through direct funding to dedicated support providers, by facilitating peer support networks, or through pools of specialist freelance advisors or facilitators.

The analysis offered in this report 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?

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 workers, delivering activities and services and holding leases on behalf of 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. In 2022, Local Trust took the decision to directly employ regionally based **Big Local Area Coordinators** as part of a more targeted and direct relational support approach as the programme neared its end. This led to a change in the rep role, and contractors subsequently became Big Local Area Advisors. Local Trust have also provided opportunities for Big Local areas to engage with specific skills development initiatives around, for example, impact measurement, community engagement, communication, and asset ownership, as well as an array of peer learning, support and networking opportunities.

Big Local areas have used their Big Local resources to buy in additional support, for example, to add capacity by employing workers or bringing in ad hoc technical expertise from local professionals and consultants.

The support offers have aimed to fulfil a wide range of functions, but broadly six support functions can be identified: 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, in the **'consolidating' phase**, as the needs or areas began to diversify, Local Trust adopted a new approach, by **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. A third, **'spending out' phase** has emerged in the programme's final years, with a more **centrally led, targeted and differentiated** support offer, referred to as 'Make it Happen', which has been designed to assist Big Local areas in delivering their plans and spending out, with a reconfigured team of Area Coordinators and Area Advisors.

Support needs 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: peer learning (through networking opportunities) and the critical friend role (played by Big Local reps and others).

Peer learning and networking 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.

Big Local 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 has developed, providing challenges 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.

Locally Trusted Organisations have adopted different approaches in the programme. 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, such as employment of Big Local workers, holding leases for Big Local buildings and in some cases delivering projects (Local Trust, 2021c). 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.

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

1. **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.

2. **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.

3. **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.

4. **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.

5. **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 significant caring commitments.

6. **Interest and confidence in nationally driven support opportunities**: Several case studies 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**: While some support offers have been open to both residents and workers to access, others have been specifically targeted at residents (e.g. support designed to strengthen community leadership, control and decision-making). When the rationale has not been fully explained and/or understood, this could lead to disappointment.

The difference that support has made

Support in the Big Local programme has contributed to **five medium- and longer-term outcomes,** together helping to build areas' capacities and capabilities to deliver 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.

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 Locals, were appreciated, helping to spread understandings about what does and does not 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 provided in the financial management 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.

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.

The factors 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 is the support provided and who the support reaches. 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.

A series of balancing acts

Broadly speaking there are 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 on what support needs come to be prioritised, and who chooses support providers. There are pros and cons of each approach, but also blurred lines and complex considerations in play across the two. For example, the national, programme-directed approach may be informed by intelligence gathered from local experience, and local, self-directed approach can be informed by national advice and guidance.

Alongside this, there is a set of contingent circumstances which affect uptake and outcomes. First, Big Local areas are at **different starting points**, in that some have a lot of existing capability and seem to require very little external input, some try to access all the support on offer, and

others struggle 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 through the evaluation. The design and operation of any form of community-oriented programme must 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, and 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 layers 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.

1. Introduction

1.1 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). Throughout the programme, the evaluation has mostly focused on the first dimension of the hypothesis - the long-term funding, and in particular the relative flexibility in how the £1.15 million available to each Big Local area is used. Less attention has been paid to the second dimension, the support to build capacity of residents in Big Local areas to take action locally to improve their communities.

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 Big Local reps, Locally Trusted Organisations (LTOs), access to specialist technical expertise on key issues, and a range of networking opportunities. Support through the programme has evolved over time and was partially reshaped in the summer of 2022 with the launch of the 'Make it Happen' support offer. While research has been undertaken on different aspects of the Big Local model, the changing support offer as a whole has not been examined in any depth. This report uses evidence and insight from the Our Bigger Story longitudinal evaluation of Big Local, alongside previous research and evaluation around aspects of support, to explore the support Local Trust has offered and Big Local areas have accessed, and the difference it is felt to have made to the work and progress in their areas.

In the rest of this introduction, we outline key features of debates from the literature on capacity building support. Section 2 discusses the changing support offer in the Big Local programme, noting three phases of support provision. Section 3 draws from the experience of the 15 Our Bigger Story case study areas to look more closely and critically at support needs and uptake. Section 4 considers the difference that capacity building support makes to individuals, partnerships and communities, and seeks to understand varied experiences between different Big Local areas. Section 5 concludes the report by addressing a set of key questions: who decides what support is needed; who chooses support providers; what determines uptake and outcome; and how might it be different?

1.2 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' (ABIs) through the 1980s and 1990s, perhaps reaching its high-point in the 1997-2010 Labour government's regeneration programmes, such as the New Deal for Communities (NDC), the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund and the 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. Learning from work in overseas development, support was thus wrapped in the language of 'community capacity building' (Chaskin, 2001). 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".

It 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), including ensuring that 'appropriate support is accessible at neighbourhood, parish or community level'* (ibid: 11). 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. For example, through direct grants to dedicated support providers to provide training, mentoring and consultancy, or by facilitating peer support networks, as in the growing interest in residents' consultancy and Guide Neighbourhoods, where

communities that had learnt by doing could pass on their knowledge to others (McCabe et al, 2007).

Increasingly programmes established pools of specialist freelance advisors who could be drawn upon for bespoke support as and when required. From 2002 Labour's newly established Neighbourhood Renewal Unit worked with government regional offices to recruit a pool of expert trouble-shooting Neighbourhood Renewal Advisors, who could work directly with local strategic partnerships, community empowerment networks and NDC areas to provide expert support and guidance and to solve problems (Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, 2002). While the initial community-led promise of the NDC programme was squeezed, through 'a complex and increasingly constraining *"institutional corset"* set by central government' (Lawless and Pearson, 2012: 522), a more flexible approach was being designed into the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's four-year Neighbourhoods Programme (2003-2006). A *'light touch'* array of support was offered to 20 neighbourhood groups across the UK, including, among other things, 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).

The focus turned to how, and how much, the market should be managed, how quality could be ensured, and the role of diagnosis as a means for tailoring support in appropriate ways. Demand-led capacity building informed new approaches from central government and grant-making bodies, such as the National Lottery Community Fund's Building Capabilities agenda (Big Lottery Fund, 2012; Macmillan and Ellis Paine, 2014) and *'funder plus'* initiatives from Lloyds Bank Foundation for England and Wales, amongst others (Cairns et al, 2011; Lloyds Bank Foundation, 2019).

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? are communities and groups sufficiently well informed as consumers and equipped to navigate the new support landscape? and, in so far as resources for support have become more targeted and concentrated, how is access to capacity building determined, and what happens to those unable to access support? These questions 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.

1.3 Data sources

During 2022 the Our Bigger Story evaluation has worked with Local Trust and the 15 Big Local case study areas to explore these questions further and reflect on the changing Big Local support offer. This has involved:

- Interviews with seven Local Trust staff, July-September 2022, to gather information and reflections on Local Trust support during the programme.

- 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.

We combined this information with a broader analysis of longitudinal data collected throughout the duration of the Our Bigger Story evaluation, against 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?

Subsequent sections address each of these questions in turn.

2. The support offer

Alongside funding, Local Trust has developed significant support offers for Big Local areas. This section considers the different forms and functions of support that have been made available to Big Local areas through the programme, or that they themselves have sought out and paid for with their programme funding. It identifies three distinct phases in Local Trust's support offer, each reflecting different programme approaches and assumptions.

2.1 Forms and functions of support

Over time, Big Local areas have had the opportunity to engage with a variety of different forms of support, which have fulfilled different functions. In this section we summarise some of the key forms and functions of support provided. It is not the job of this report to list (or evaluate) all the different types, forms and functions of support that have been offered: our aim, instead, is to make sense of some of the key aspects of support and how these have developed over time.

All areas were required by Local Trust, as a minimum, to engage with two of the support offers - Local Trusted Organisations and Big Local reps. A **Local Trusted Organisation** (LTO) is the mechanism through which the funding flows from Local Trust to each partnership. LTOs take on responsibility for the **financial management** and **accountability** of the partnerships' funds, including banking and bookkeeping functions. Often, however, they also take on the responsibility for employing or contracting Big Local workers, holding building lease agreements, advising partnerships on issues such as insurance, and – when working at their best – facilitating access to local contacts and networks. The role of LTOs has developed as the programme and the needs of partnerships have evolved. Across the Our Bigger Story areas, as they move towards spending out, some partnerships are establishing themselves as formal organisations and taking on the LTO functions; others have merged with their LTO.

Meanwhile, **Big Local reps** were individuals appointed by Local Trust to offer tailored support to a Big Local area and share successes, challenges, and news with the organisation. They are often referred to as the *'eyes and ears'* of Local Trust, acting as a point of liaison between partnerships and Local Trust. Initially the reps were managed by Renaisi, as one of the initial partners in the consortium which established the Big Local programme, but over time Local Trust took on the role. Recently, the role has changed, with the introduction of Big Local Area Advisors (see section 2.2).

Most of the 15 Our Bigger Story areas have spent a proportion of their programme funding on employing or contracting **Big Local workers**, generally via their LTOs. Big Local workers are deployed to provide a range of functions from **administrative** tasks through to **community development** and **project management**. Residents have looked to paid staff to do the leg work of their Big Local and keep things going on a 9-5 basis, but also to train and support volunteers, and to translate what partnership members want to do into practice. Overall, the function of workers could be classed as adding capacity to the partnership.

Some areas have employed multiple workers, over time and/or at any one time. Some partnerships have also sourced and funded tailored support from local providers, as and when needed. This has generally focused on **buying in technical expertise**, including legal advisors, planners, surveyors, and various other consultants, that have been contracted to meet specific needs at particular points in time.

Local Trust have also given Big Local areas the opportunity to get involved in various **skills development and consultancy** initiatives, including a series of activities provided by partner organisations such as the Media Trust and Shared Assets. The skills and services that they have sought to develop have been wide-ranging,

including impact measurement, community engagement, communication, and asset ownership. These have been a mix of generic programmes run at a national level, and more bespoke or tailored offerings. As noted above, some partnerships have also sourced their own skills development and consultancy support from local providers.

Local Trust also worked in partnership, at the start of the Big Local programme, with **UnLtd** - a leading provider of support to social entrepreneurs in and around the UK - to support the stimulation of entrepreneurship in every Big Local area through its Star People awards. Over time this was developed into a matched funding opportunity which Big Local communities could opt in or out of.

The **Community Leadership Academy,** established in 2020 by Local Trust in partnership with Koreo, the Young Foundation and Northern Soul, provides leadership development training and support for volunteers involved in community engagement and/or delivering projects across Big Local areas.

Additionally, a range of different support offers have been created which focus more on networking, peer learning and support, and communication across and between Big Local areas. These include the annual Big Local Connects conference, learning clusters, chairs and regional networks, alongside newsletters and interactive online communications (through Workplace).

Looking across these, and other, support offers available to Big Local areas, six key functions of support can be identified: technical expertise, skills development, adding capacity, guidance and information sharing, relationship building, and peer support (see figure 1). Many of the individual support mechanisms fulfil more than one of the functions, and indeed while some may have been designed to primarily fulfil one function, those that took them up may feel that they fulfilled alternative functions. The forms that support have taken range from: technology-based provision, through to events and gatherings, workshops, mentoring, and individual workers and consultants.

2.2 Phases of support

Emphasis on and within these different forms and functions of support has changed over time. Three broad phases of support have been identified. Each reflects shifting programme approaches underpinned by evolving ideas of what is needed, where the impetus for support should come from (demand-, supply-, or funder-led), who pays (Local Trust or Big Local areas), how universal or targeted support offers should be, and who coordinates and provides support offers (Local Trust employing and managing directly, Local Trust contracted providers, Big Local areas/LTOs).

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

TECHNICAL EXPERTISE
e.g. planning, legal, money management, business development

SKILLS DEVELOPMENT
e.g. communications, community leadership, review and evaluation

ADDING CAPACITY
e.g. administration, facilitation, project management, community development

GUIDANCE & INFORMATION SHARING
e.g. access to online platforms and resources, newsletter

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING
e.g. networking, mentoring, emotional support, training

PEER SUPPORT
e.g. face to face and online networking

Getting started – partner led, generic, piecemeal
In the first few years of the programme, as Big Local partnerships were establishing themselves and formulating plans, Local Trust made a commitment to spending no more than 5% of the available funding on central costs. The central team was kept deliberately small, with nearly all support offers being outsourced. The original consortium partners who successfully tendered to run the programme tended to provide universal offerings, often of *'one-size-fits-all'* support. Some of these support inputs were consistently provided across all areas, others could be selected by Big Local areas. For example, Renaisi managed the reps, who had a relatively hands on role in supporting the creation of partnerships and their plans across all 150 areas. UnLtd also provided a service across all 150 areas, in their case with the aim of stimulating social entrepreneurship amongst Big Local area residents. Other support offers were left to the discretion of Big Local partnerships, such as networking opportunities provided by the Neighbourhood Management Network (NANM), environmental support through Capacity Global or funding management provided by Small Change. In this early phase, organisations were also invited to apply to be included in a marketplace of providers from which Big Local residents could select training and consultancy services.

Consolidating – broadening the offer
As time went on and the programme was increasingly embedded in Big Local areas, each developing their own plans, activities, and approaches, a change of Chief Executive at Local Trust coincided with a progressive shift in the support offer. Reflective of broader culture change within Local Trust, the commitment to limiting central costs to 5% was relaxed and additional capacity built within the central team. In 2018 the guidance for reps was changed, broadening their role to include, for example, more intensive support to areas that were facing specific challenges in their partnership or delivery issues, and, over time, their contracts were brought across to Local Trust for management. Alongside, a wider range of national support partners with specialist expertise were recruited, and learning clusters were established, reflecting a growing emphasis on facilitating networking and peer support amongst

Big Local areas. The emphasis was on broadening the range of support offers available, whilst allowing areas to identify and select those that they wanted to take up. Marketing was reportedly *'passive'* and take up often relied on reps acting as gatekeepers to inform areas of support offers which they thought were most relevant.

Spending out – centrally led, targeted, differentiated
As the programme enters into its final years, Local Trust has refined its support offer primarily through the development of the *'Making it happen'* initiative, with the aim of ensuring *"all Big Local areas are able to deliver their plans, spend their money effectively and create lasting change in their areas…"* (Local Trust, support offer proposal, 2021). Support has become relatively more centrally determined and controlled, albeit informed by intelligence gathered from local experience. It has become increasingly targeted rather than generic and universal, though partnerships are still free to make their own choice about whether to take up the offers presented to them. As a Local Trust staff member commented: *"it's not a one-size-fits-all offer that's needed anymore"*. Local Trust is providing more intensive support to aid Big Local partnerships in finishing the programme. Area Coordinators have been centrally employed, working with Big Local Area Advisors (drawn from the previous reps pool) as necessary, to help direct targeted support to those areas most in need as the programme draws to a close. For example, support will become increasingly targeted at areas which have not to date spent much of their allocated programme resources, with the belief that *"there are also going to be areas that could spend a lot of that million if they get some real handholding and real support in that period"*. (Local Trust staff member). Together, this was felt to be a significant shift in the support offer.

3. Support needs and uptake

As section 2 has outlined, initial support offers were based partly on the assets, interests and assumptions of the national partner organisations that had successfully bid to deliver the Big Local programme. While some of these assumptions were based on evidence of what had worked in previous programmes and proved useful to residents, other forms of support were more speculative. For example, evidence from the JRF Neighbourhoods Programme (Taylor et al, 2007) had illustrated the significance of networks as a popular and effective route to peer learning, whereas some of the support available was based on what a marketplace of providers wanted to offer. As the programme has progressed, Local Trust has gathered evidence about the needs and preferences of Big Local partnerships and evolved different ways of meeting them. In this section we focus on what Big Local areas said they most needed and valued in terms of support.

3.1 Support mechanisms and functions

During 2022, Our Bigger Story asked the case study partnerships and their paid workers about what they have most valued in terms of support function and type from the programme. Responses included access to Zoom, the Locally Trusted Organisations (LTOs) and specialist advice and support, but what came out most strongly were peer learning through networking opportunities and the critical friend role played by Big Local reps (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Functions of support

Peer learning	7
Critical friend	7
Expertise	5
Guidance	4
Facilitation	3
Mediation	2
Mentoring	1
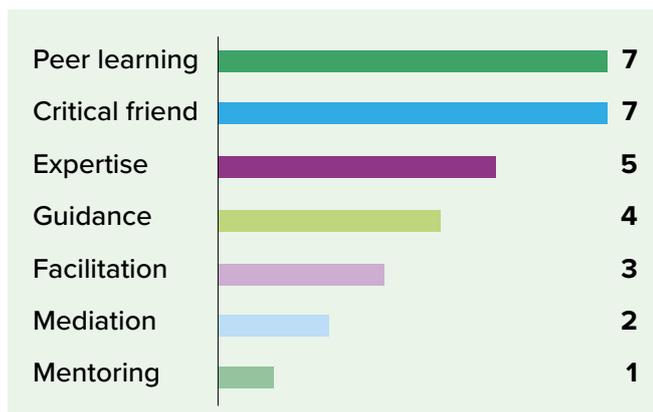
When the issue was explored at the 2022 Our Bigger Story residential, with 31 participants representing 14 Big Local areas, the common theme surfacing in these two frontrunners was face to face connection – the building of personable relationships within, and facilitated by, the programme.

Peer learning and networking

> *"It's about networking and the sharing of that information, which is vital"*
> **(partnership member)**

At the start of the programme, many residents struggled to understand Big Local and its ethos around creating community wide outcomes, as opposed to other funding they had come across. They were therefore looking to find out how other areas were interpreting the programme and how they were getting going. The regionally based network events that began in 2012 were consequently very popular and all 15 case study areas attended at least some of these. The programme was rolled out in three waves over 2011 and 2012, with a cohort of 50 areas per wave. Those Big Local areas that were launched in the third and final cohort of Big Locals, at the end of 2012, valued the opportunity to meet with people from waves one and two who had started their Big Local journeys earlier. One such resident observed that the events and learning from more experienced residents helped with how to create a local vision for their area: *"[Met] other Big Locals around the country. Realised all in the same boat. This helps with confidence and ideas"*.

Another partnership member commented that they had *"Learnt a lot more from these than anything else ... learnt at an event at the start that we need to go out to people, not expect them to come to us. This has informed us all the way through."* This partnership member went to say that networking opportunities have all been beneficial, but useful in different ways: regional events have provided an opportunity to meet people locally and visit

them afterwards; national gatherings have brought together people from completely different areas with the potential to find something in common; and the themed events have been *"where the real learning happens"*.

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 are a space in which ways of working are reinforced and partnership members feel their work is recognised and celebrated. Evaluations of action learning networks for partnership chairs, learning cluster groups and large-scale events such as the annual gathering, Big Local Connects, have illustrated the benefits and value that residents place on getting together. An example of this was evidenced in the evaluation of learning clusters (Local Trust, 2021a), which reflected that 84% of participants *"found the opportunities to share and network with other Big Local areas most useful, compared to other aspects of the clusters"*. Even during the pandemic, people were keen to continue to meet each other, albeit online. Chairs' networks continued in most regions and there was widespread take up of COVID-19 specific online gatherings. Online networks do not, however, build connections and bonding in the way that many residents value. Indeed, one common refrain from many Our Bigger Story respondents is that Local Trust has retained too much online engagement following the pandemic. A Local Trust informant concurred that while online works well in terms of learning, face to face gatherings are important for networking.

While networking and peer support were generally positively received, there are some people for whom the networking has been a disempowering experience. Given that Big Local Connects is hugely popular, these may be minority views, but two respondents separately described the event as *"too large and a beauty contest"* (partnership chair) and a showcasing rather than a learning event (worker). In more than one case study area, people felt that they were judged as a *'failing'* area and so were reluctant to engage with events which were about *"look how good we all are"* (partnership chair). In a different area, a worker commented that:

"*all you hear about is the Big Locals that are doing really well. There's 150 of them and you only ever hear about maybe 30, you know, the ones that are achieving everything. And you think, like, I wish I could hear from the ones that are even worse [than us]"*.

Big Local Reps

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

Reps were a long-term presence in the journeys of Big Local partnerships. At the start, they offered advice and facilitation – promoting the Big Local programme, sharing information about its ethos, purpose and intended processes (often with agencies as well as residents) and bringing people together to take it forward. As the programme has developed, they played the role of a critical friend to partnerships – someone who could challenge from a position of experience, knowledge, trust, and support, sometimes presenting challenge around governance structures and behaviours, for example, as well as providing facilitation and mediation as needed.

Big Local reps were the regular face to face contact with the programme for partnerships and whilst not universally lauded across the 15 case study areas, were positively mentioned by most interviewed. The rep role was in place from 2011, providing group facilitation, advice and guidance, support (sometimes supervisory) to chairs and workers, and a link to and back from Local Trust. One partnership member talked about the important rep role of providing guidance on compliance with programme requirements: *"telling us what we are doing right"*, and another reported that their reps had been their essential link in knowing what was happening in the programme: *"Having this face-to-face connection is really crucial"*. This point is especially pertinent for those who do not make use of Local Trust's online communication systems. Others have 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"* (partnership chair). In another area, a Big Local worker suggested that reps added legitimacy to the programme: *"someone who is the*

link between our little group and the bigger, more serious side of the programme".

In some cases, reps took on elements of a management role - picking up what should properly be the responsibility of the LTO - and some provided support and supervision to Big Local workers. As mentioned above, they were also the eyes, ears and voice of Local Trust. Big Local partnership members and workers have interpreted the role differently, usually in response to reps' different ways of working. One partnership member, for example, commented that they liked the current rep as they helped to find solutions, but felt some previous ones were too directive. Another remarked that the rep was basically: *"someone who keeps an eye on what we're doing and reports back to Local Trust if we're not doing it properly"*, and another: *"wouldn't say rep offers very much support right now. Previous rep was very controlling; if* [they] *didn't like something, it just didn't happen"*. One respondent said they were not really sure what the rep was meant to do and there have been some concerns about a lack of continuity; for example, one partnership has worked with five reps in the last four years.

There were different expectations from residents, then, about the rep role and a balancing act on the part of the reps themselves as to whether they should orient more towards the Big Local partnership as a friend or as a reporting mechanism to Local Trust. This has created some variation across partnerships about how effective reps were perceived to be; in one partnership, some members were looking for someone who would respond to questions about Local Trust policies and procedures, while others wanted a critical friend who would challenge poor partnership governance. For example, while one partnership commented that *"The rep is the gel that kept it all together – this is the most valuable support offer. Would have this above anything else"* and another that *"It is helpful that they are not local and are therefore more objective"*, there is also a perspective that the need and desire for a meaningful bond with the rep led to a relationship that at times might be described as *"too cosy"* (Big Local rep).

LTOs

"Part of us but not part of us"
(partnership member)

Relationships have also developed through other aspects of the programme. Some LTOs have been praised for the personal and professional support they have provided to partnership chairs as well as to the Big Local workers they have employed, with two Big Local areas describing the relationship between the partnership and the LTO as *'symbiotic'*. Partnership members in the case study areas have described LTOs as *"a tower of strength"*- providing advice and guidance, bringing wisdom and experience in project management.

Unfortunately, this has not been the experience everywhere. LTOs have interpreted their roles differently and some Big Local areas have seen the oversight role of the LTO as over-cautious or over-restrictive, with little support beyond financial management. Others have complained about a perceived lack of transparency in how the LTO accounts for management fees. One case study area articulated its poor relationship as *"The forming, storming stuff – we were just storming with the LTO …, every meeting was a battle, and it put people off"* (Big local worker). This illustrates how support provision is not just a matter of expertise but about personalities, social and group work skills as well.

LTO functions evolve over time, particularly as Big Local partnerships become incorporated and accountable for their own financial reporting. Several partnerships have reported that LTO facilitation of that transition in terms of legal structures and financial accountability has been beneficial.

An intermittent need for specific and specialist forms of support

"The good thing that Local Trust did was step in"
(partnership member)

As outlined in section 2, Local Trust has commissioned services from a range of specialist providers over the course of the programme. Some of this assistance has lasted over several years; for example, UnLtd's support for social entrepreneurs and Small Change's guidance around financial enterprise and investment. The life cycle of a Big Local partnership, however, is not a linear process and evidence from the 15 case study areas 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. Our Bigger Story has noted interventions directed by Local Trust and by partnerships, with support from external agencies, Local Trust staff or a member of the rep pool. Examples range from technical support, such as a Big Local partnership finding a planning expert on Local Trust's marketplace of support providers in the first support phase, a specialist provider arming a partnership with evidence for actions within their community plan, a series of facilitated workshops informing a partnership about their options with regard to legal status, through to an additional rep coming in to sort out a tricky conflict or a partnership paying for facilitation of a review and planning session.

Drawing on insights gathered through research and broader knowledge of the Big Local areas as they progressed through the programme, Local Trust has proactively attempted to foresee the type of support that might be required through offering, for example, skills building around volunteer recruitment and retention, and legal and governance expertise for partnerships who are creating their own organisational structures as the programme draws to a close. However, this is more complex when it comes to the emotional support that residents may require. Some residents have felt that their rep and/or Local Trust have been too hands-off at points when they could have usefully intervened during a breakdown in relationships or community conflict. More specifically, partnership members from several areas have commented on feeling let down by a lack of direct emotional

support from Local Trust during COVID-19: *"No-one picked up the phone to see if we were ok"* (Chair), and they have commented on a reduced amount of face-to-face contact and support since then. A Local Trust respondent acknowledged that emotional support may have been lacking:

"maybe we have provided them with the sort of practical.....thematic support around ... how do you do a campaign [for example] ... but ... perhaps not had enough support in the ... emotional side of it, created a safe space for them to share how they're experiencing being involved and, hearing from likeminded people who are experiencing similar things in leadership positions in other Big Locals and give them a chance to work through those feelings with others...".

3.2 Take up of support

Offering, and taking up, the right support at the right time can be a challenge. As we saw above, all partnerships are different and choose to take up, decline or ignore support offered by the programme for a range of reasons. Reflecting on Local Trust's review of its support offer (Local Trust, 2021b) and drawing on evidence from the Our Bigger Story areas, we have identified the following considerations which together can explain whether and how support is accessed:

Skills and capabilities – different starting points
Big Locals are not equally experienced, equipped or comfortable accessing support. On the one hand, some areas have partnership members with relevant professional skills who are well networked and have access to specialist local support. They do not feel the need to take up national support offers and, when they do identify a support need, they prefer to find someone locally through existing networks (see below). On the other hand, there are areas where there is little experience of community activism and knowledge about what is available locally, or the type of support that might be helpful.

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. One partnership member, for example, talked about how their initial steering group was

advised to invest in training around governance and effective meeting skills: *"became a well-trained partnership from the beginning … otherwise would have floundered"*. In another area, the LTO already had very strong networks locally as well as across the wider county.

Awareness and knowledge about what is on offer
Opportunities for support may have been missed. Some residents and workers do not engage with online communications such as Workplace or have found Local Trust communications difficult to navigate in terms of what is relevant to their particular Big Local. There are also examples of reps playing a gatekeeping role and not passing on information, feeling that residents are already over-burdened *"I think Local Trust over expects of partners and forgets they are all volunteers, some with day jobs"* (Rep). In addition, and as reported by Local Trust, *"An initial challenge was that the information provided to areas about some offers did not always seem clear about the benefits or outputs …"* (Local Trust, 2021b). Local Trust concludes that this may have made some Big Local areas sceptical.

Perceived relevance of what is on offer
Questions have also been raised in relation to the appropriateness of the support available. Several case study areas have described some offers as short-term consultancy when what they felt they needed was longer-term, hands-on support. This has particularly been the case with some of the match funded offers (where Local Trust and the Big Local area each contribute half the cost). Partnerships have not always seen these as value for money – feeling that their money could be better used to employ someone locally as it would have more impact than paying for external consultants.

Timing
Big Local areas are moving along different developmental timelines; the right support at the right time for one partnership may be inappropriate for another. So, while one area has said that support has been timely in terms of sorting out legal status in advance of spend out, another has said it came too late. In another area, a specific support offer around social enterprise

development was seen to come too early in terms of the Big Local plan priorities.

In addition, partnerships often only identify the need for support at a point of great difficulty or crisis. Several case study areas have bought in their own technical support, as and when needed, and frequently sourced from a local provider. And, as in the point above, there may have been occasions of divergence between what partnerships felt they wanted and what others thought they needed.

Resource
In line with the idea of a *'paradox of capacity building'* (see section 1), accessing support has resource implications. The availability of the time and money required to engage in support is unevenly distributed across Big local areas and residents, contributing to variable take up of the support available. Peer learning opportunities, for example, tended to suit partnerships where there is a predominant demographic of members who have retired but those with younger members have found it more difficult to participate. Some partnerships comprise a majority of members who work and do not have a lot of available time – and the time they do have is put into their local area:

> *"Board capacity has been a problem all the way through. No time to meet with support providers, no time to engage with it. Is it worth my time – what will we get back? Most of us are employed, have little voluntary time"*
> **(partnership member).**

Similarly, a partnership chair noted that: *"(meetings) can be interesting but can I justify giving up a full day for a meeting and travelling?"* and another chair commented that the regional chairs meetings were useful when supported by Local Trust but felt that they could not justify time and expense when this support was withdrawn.

Some parents and people with caring responsibilities have also felt that despite Local Trust's offer to reimburse caring costs, they could not justify leaving their children or other dependents to attend face to face events.

Interest and confidence in nationally driven support opportunities

For some partnerships, there has been enough support available to them at a local level. An LTO reflected that the preparatory work put in by the worker made the rep almost superfluous as *"By the time rep came the Board was really organised, decision making protocols were all there, there really was no need"*. Indeed, this area felt that it would be better to just ask for specific rep support as needed, or perhaps have a help desk or a contact centre, where you could phone in or send an email and then get a response. Elsewhere, a partnership member expressed the view that:

"Being part of Big Local is about being invested in the community – and the combination of resources we had in the board plus the rep seemed enough. So, didn't really look to Local Trust for support".

In addition, members of this partnership agreed that there has always been a preference for using local resources, such as solicitors, for business planning and a local landscape architect. Another partnership concurred by suggesting that investing in existing support provision, through a Council for Voluntary Service, for example, is important – and that a national support programme can parachute in unsustainable support which undermines sustainable local support provision:

> *"Rather than [national] support for incorporation, why not [names area] Big Local? They could talk to us better and we know and trust them"* **(partnership member).**

This is matched, for some, by a distrust of *'them in London'* who it is feared would not understand the local context or concerns and that there would be little connection: *"Local Trust say if* [we] *have a problem get in touch with one of these new companies. But* [they] *haven't introduced us to them – trust is a big part of what we do"* (partnership member). One partnership suggested that there needs to be an interface between the support providers and the partnerships to test out relationships and potential outcomes of the support at an early stage and before any commitments are made.

Restrictions and limits

There are those that have looked for support but have been disappointed. This includes Big Local workers who have not been able to access the support they sought, either because they are an employed worker as opposed to an unpaid resident or because it has been deemed inappropriate. Local Trust's own position on support for Big Local workers has shifted during the programme. Given the programme's focus on building community leadership and control, in the first few years it was felt that resources should be prioritised for, and directed to, residents rather than workers. As time went on, this became a moot point, partly because many workers were drawn from the community and therefore residents themselves, but also because it came to be recognised that the more effective the worker, the more they could support partnership members and other residents. More latterly, Local Trust has worked with the principle that the employers of Big Local workers (most often an LTO) are responsible for staff training and development, and therefore workers should not be a priority for personal and professional development opportunities provided by Local Trust. This has created some tensions, for example where Big Local workers have wanted to participate in the Community Leadership Academy, peer learning networks, and consultancy offers, but have not been permitted to do so. Perhaps, there could have been clearer communication about the rationale for eligibility to the different forms of support on offer, to mitigate misunderstandings.

To conclude, this section has explored support needs and perspectives on the support offered. People from the case study areas have made suggestions about what could be different but before we get there, the next section looks at the difference the support has made.

4. The difference that the support has made

Previous sections of the report have outlined the changing nature of Local Trust support for Big Local areas, how support needs were identified and the take up of the Local Trust offers. A further critical question is, however, what difference that support has made to residents in terms 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'.

Earlier reports from the Our Bigger Story evaluation have tested the role of long-term funding in terms of creating positive and lasting change (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. The focus of this report is on how support has contributed to both that overarching goal of hyper-local change, through considering its role in building the capacity and agency of residents; it is not on evaluating the impact of individual support offers. While all Our Bigger Story areas have worked with LTOs, Big Local reps, Big Local workers, and have engaged – to varying degrees – in networking and peer support activities, there has not been widespread take up of the broader support offers made available through Local Trust provider partners. Evidence of their impact is therefore uneven.

4.1 The outcomes of support

From discussions with the 15 Our Bigger Story areas, we have identified five medium- and longer-term outcomes which support has contributed to: increased confidence; enhanced skills and knowledge; improved group working and relationship management; direct capacity;

legacy. Together, these outcomes can be seen as helping to build areas' capacities and capabilities to deliver Big Local. These outcomes were not evenly distributed, and in discussing them we also consider the factors which appear to have contributed to this variation.

Increased confidence
A key outcome to arise from across different support offers was the development of confidence amongst individual residents, especially those Big Local partnership members that engaged most directly with support. This was particularly valued in the early years of the programme when residents found themselves responsible to others in their community for the use of a million pounds. While different forms of support have contributed to the development of confidence, networking events, such as regional chairs' meetings, learning clusters and Big Local Connects, were highly valued in this regard, not least in terms of the opportunities that they offered for peer learning and support. Through meeting with other areas, residents were reassured that everyone was in the same boat, and that they were on the right track. And it was not just residents who felt this way. An LTO officer concurred that *"Those things were really, really useful for me, and really helped me work out what this was meant to look like"*.

Reps were also credited with helping to build confidence amongst partnership members, through *"telling us what we are doing right"* and giving reassurance to the partnerships about the decisions they have taken.

Also directly mentioned in terms of building confidence was the Community Leadership Academy, with reference made to the mentoring support associated with the programme. One volunteer, for example, said it gave them a lot more confidence to take action in their community.

Enhanced skills and knowledge

Engagement in support offers has led to the development of new skills and knowledge amongst residents, particularly those involved in partnerships. This has included building knowledge about the rules and requirements of the programme itself. Reps, for example, were credited for helping steering groups and partnership members navigate the Getting Started phase (involving community visioning and identifying local needs) in the early days of Big Local. This has continued through ongoing planning and signposting to the different types of Local Trust support on offer. One longstanding partnership member noted that *"Without the rep* [we] *wouldn't know what was going on"* and another explained: *"If starting a programme from scratch then need support and advice – how to put together a plan, consultation, finances etc. Needed a focus and a steer. Couldn't have done this without this type of support* [from the rep]*".* The critical friend role played by reps was helpful here, such as challenging a partnership around relative weaknesses in its governance structure leading to the recruitment of some younger members. In another area the rep has helped to move the Big Local on from underspending to one that should now spend out within the programme timeline.

Our Bigger Story participants have valued direct contact with people who have a background in working with communities, which has facilitated learning:

> *"This is much more of a people thing – the average person can understand what is happening. In the past* [we] *had someone who led on a* [different] *programme and had never been out to a community meeting – all in jargonistic speak. Local Trust people all speak our language, on our wavelength".*

Participation in specific skills and knowledge development opportunities through the national support offer has not been widespread across the Our Bigger Story areas, but there are examples of the benefits gained. Westfield Big Local participated in Local Trust's Incorporation pilot project and reported feeling much better informed about the issues and options for their

legal status as a result. And several areas have taken up the Locality support around governance and buildings management, which has helped to build both knowledge and confidence in this area. This proved timely for Radstock and Westfield Big Local partnership as it was supported to review and change its legal status in advance of spend out, and the Locality membership that came with the offer has helped Whitley Bay access a whole range of other services such as human resources expertise. The Local Trust partnership with Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion (OCSI) has also been valuable at the local level with Big Locals finding the Local Insight data invaluable in evidencing local needs: *"Save so much time when writing bids. Data I wouldn't know how to get"* (worker).

Skills and knowledge have also been developed through more informal learning opportunities, particularly through networking with other Big Local areas. Network based support offers have helped spread ideas and understandings about what works and what does not work across areas, and this was widely valued. One partnership member said they had learnt more from peer learning events than anything else:

> *"Learning about what works and what didn't, what people had tried, and unashamedly plagiarising their ideas, and others taking our ideas. Learnt at an event at the start that we need to go out to people, not expect them to come to us. This has informed us all the way through".*

Regional networks were particularly valued in the context of shared problem solving as *"at a region* [level] *people understand more of the context you are working in compared to big national events"* (partnership chair), though the information gained from the national themed networks have also informed decision-making. For example, a partnership member who participated in a learning cluster found that the information gained helped in making a decision on taking forward a complex idea: *"Shared the learning and the board discussed it. Couldn't have ruled the idea out without the knowledge gained from this".*

Improved group working and relationship management

Working together through Big Local partnerships requires teamworking, and various support offers have helped to build group/teamworking and relationship management skills. Sometimes teamwork had been enhanced through direct interventions, with the role of Big Local reps particularly highlighted in this regard. They have helped partnerships to function effectively as a team, with some reps facilitating partnership discussions in meetings and *'away days'*. They have intervened directly and mediated as necessary, for example by providing a safety valve at times of conflict or tension within a partnership or between individual partnership members. These roles have all helped to strengthen group working:

> *'People [partnership members] argued about what you could and could not do. It all got very personal and heated. What helped was the rep saying 'actually Local Trust guidance says you can't do that'. That sort of diffused the situation. It made it less personal'* (partnership member).

Such interventions have also supported relationship management when tensions have surfaced between Big Local partnerships and LTOs. For example, reps have provided backing to partnerships when there have been disputes around money management and control by LTOs: *"when we were having all the problems with the LTO the rep was useful to have that sort of, force behind, to say, 'this isn't acceptable', to say slightly more official things"* (worker).

Various support offers have led to stronger networks within and between communities. Working at the hyper-local level can be extremely isolating and networking opportunities, both face to face and online, have engendered a feeling that *'we are not alone'* but *'are part of something bigger'* (partnership member); they have enabled peer learning and offered safe spaces to talk through challenges. Further, Zoom-based workshops (initiated rapidly by Local Trust as the pandemic took hold in Spring 2020) provided ideas and perhaps more importantly peer-based emotional support for Big Local partnership members and workers at a time of crisis. These

helped engender a sense of togetherness in the face of adversity and facilitated joint problem solving. Providing partnerships with access to Zoom encouraged many people to communicate. Community groups in Big Local areas were able to flip activities from face to face to online, and partnerships were able to continue functioning through online participatory decision-making (McCabe et al, 2021b).

Reps and LTOs have both played an important role in supporting communities to make connections and build stronger relationships with external organisations. There have been cases, for example, where LTOs have raised the profile of the Big Local partnership and facilitated relationship building with other agencies such as the council. In one area, these links with the local authority have supported a strategic positioning of Big Local in regeneration initiatives. Reps were also seen as adding legitimacy to the programme, which could open doors in ways which individual residents may have struggled to do: *"Someone who is the link between our little group and the bigger, more serious side of the programme. As much as* [Big Local is] *so flexible,* [we] *still have to be accountable and the rep brings this accountability and structure"* (worker).

Direct capacity

The Local Trust model has also directly added to the capacity of partnerships and individual residents, enabling areas to get things done that they would not have had been able to do otherwise, due, for example, to lack of time or knowledge. The financial management role of LTOs freed up partnership members to carry out community visioning, engagement and planning particularly in the earlier phases of the programme as Big Local partnerships bedded in and became operational. This role has been highly valued in many of the 15 areas, though it is important to note that there have been serious difficulties and conflicts with LTOs in a few areas. The partnership chair in one Big Local area stressed the critical role of the LTO, especially if employing people or managing a building: *"[It] is 'LTO plus' and a massive asset, banker, employer, HR, provides guidance and advice, kept us on track"*. In many of the 15 case study areas, LTOs have been the

Box 1: examples of lasting effects of support from UnLtd

- In Grassland Hasmoor there is a legacy of projects, some of which have continued to form a significant part of ongoing community plans, such as the petanque court and the Pit Stop Diner. One UnLtd award recipient here said that UnLtd support *"Made a difference to individuals in that they could make things happen"*.

- In Birchfield, a lasting impact in the local community can be seen in the setting up and sustaining of an enterprise hub with around 30 community business. Birchfield Big Local has now locally sourced business planning and development support, and has backed the formation of enterprise consortia which are able to bid for larger contracts.

- Three Parishes Big Local was inspired to source its own support for rural social enterprise and business start-ups through a local contractor and made small grants for social enterprise development. The 'Be a Better Fish' project has led to a strong network of social businesses/self-employed people which reaches across local rural communities.

- The partnership in Whitley Bay have described the UnLtd contribution as a roaring success. Small businesses got off the ground as a result, and it influenced Big Local's own Small Sparks grants scheme which is still running.

- In Bountagu, the support from UnLtd stimulated social enterprise training sessions for young people and its continuing Little Ideas Fund.

employer of Big Local workers, and in most areas have offered the expected managerial supervision and support role that accompanies employment of staff. In one, this included mentoring and support for a worker who was contracted by the LTO on a self-employed basis.

Direct capacity has also been provided through both 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. Ramsey Million, for example, found a planner through the Local Trust marketplace of support offers who helped to shape the community plan, particularly in terms of strategy. They have used the planning model illustrated to them ever since.

Legacy
The above outcomes have directly contributed to longer term changes within communities, helping to ensure the legacy of the programme through confident and knowledgeable resident-led structures and resulting community-led change

(Wilson et al, 2022). Additional capacity and skills delivered and developed through support offers has led to the generation of physical assets within some Our Bigger Story areas, such as in Westfield where research by the Academy of Urbanism helped to provide evidence for their community plan and gave the impetus to support the development of a play park. In addition, a number of Our Bigger Story areas credit the support received from UnLtd for the stimulation of social enterprises and community businesses which has had a lasting effect on individuals and at a wider community level (see box 1, whilst also noting that this model was not without criticism, including concerns about the presence of national organisations at community level with little local accountability, as discussed in section 5).

Finally, it is worth noting that Local Trust's relationships with other organisations, as well as its national standing, has opened up doors to additional funding, information and influence. Whitley Bay Big Local, for example, believe that being part of a national programme has given them a profile on which they can continue to capitalise

and provided connections to people with influence through particular Local Trust interest and lobby groups.

4.2 Variations in outcomes

The outcomes of support have not been found to be even but varied by offer, community and individual. Several factors seemed important:

- **Who determined the need for support**
  There is evidence that some partnership chairs have made executive decisions about whether their Big Local did or did not want or need the support on offer. In addition, some respondents feel that support has been imposed on them, either centrally by Local Trust or by their rep. Ownership of the need for support, and a corresponding willingness to engage with it, are important, as illustrated by one respondent: *"[The rep said] 'This is what you need' and signed [the partnership] up to it. They haven't really embraced it because they didn't really have a chance to decide whether they wanted it or not".*

- **Who delivered the support**
  Some support providers are felt to have been more appropriate and effective than others. This may be about the consistency and capacity of the support providing organisation, but also relates to the individuals working with them. Residents emphasised the need to have confidence in who they are working with and whether they put *"the right people in the right place to do the job"* (partnership member). A rep concurred that it is *"Not about whether the offer is appropriate but the quality of the individual providing support"*.

- **How the support was provided**
  The quality of relationships within Big Local matter, and at least part of this includes the observation that residents have valued being respected as equal partners, albeit in need of some advice and guidance. This has often been the basis of effective relationships with LTOs for example. A partnership chair noted that: *"This worked well, brilliant support. … Also got a lot of sage advice from them. They didn't make*

it about them … saw us as an equal partner". Another concurred with: *"Gave me a lot of support when I was chair"*. Similarly, residents have valued relationship-based support from reps: *"ongoing emotional support and motivation that comes from a long relationship you cannot buy"* (partnership chair), a sentiment that was echoed by an LTO when talking about reps and Big Local workers: *"It's that relationship isn't it, a lot of it, when it comes down to it"*. It is important to recognise that relationships are complex – one person's positive assessment may not be to another's taste. For example, two people from the same Big Local area described the same rep in starkly contrasting ways: *"so approachable …. got on famously … very, very down to earth"* (partnership member) but also *"found him slightly patronising"* (LTO). However, there is an overwhelming message from the Our Bigger Story areas that face-to-face support is important and highly valued, and some criticism that there is an over-reliance from Local Trust on e-communications. People point to Workplace with a view of *"partners feeling overwhelmed by the amount of information – and then stop using it"* (rep). In the same vein, several partnership membership members have commented on the increasing use of online support in negative terms.

- **Who the support reached**
  As discussed in section 3, there are several factors that have affected who has and who has not been able to directly access available support, relating to conscious and unconscious gatekeeping through to the time people have available, and indeed, the nature of the support on offer – the extent to which it has focused more on support for established leaders rather than potential future leaders (Local Trust interview).

We have found that not all partnerships have shared out support opportunities across their members. Much of the relationship-based support that Our Bigger Story participants have highlighted has been experienced on a one to one or one to a few basis. Whilst there are those who have consciously ensured that a maximum number of partnership members can attend networking

events, in others only one or two people have had opportunities to gain from the relationships they make with others. In addition, the learning gained from attending networking events or specialist training is not always fed back and shared across the partnership, or the broader community, and may have been lost where there has been a turnover of partnership members. Passing on learning is difficult, a skill in itself. For example, findings from the evaluation of the Guide Neighbourhoods programme (McCabe et al, 2007) demonstrated the challenges of acting on learning and of passing on inspiration, particularly in seemingly different socio-economic and political contexts. In the Big Local programme, it appears that there is also a question around the extent to which residents understand the support they have received and are then able to explain it to others, for example, the implications of one governance structure over another.

Some aspects of support can of course benefit many people at once. The Local Trust support around using Zoom during the pandemic enabled many community groups to remain active, and technical advice and guidance has contributed to the creation of community spaces. Similarly, the examples of some of the UnLtd support in Box 1 indicate broad community impact.

To conclude this section, research participants have appreciated that *"Local Trust is itself a learning organisation and has had to adapt its support as it has developed"* (Big Local worker). Across the 15 areas, some support offers have been taken up and benefitted active individuals as well as the broader community, there are some offers that none of the 15 have utilised and there are some that have attracted a fair amount of criticism. Overall, however, there are examples of the support on offer contributing to **agency** through support to individual activists and partnerships at both an operational and an emotional level which has contributed to effective partnership working, and in turn created the **positive and lasting change** sought by the programme.

5. A series of balancing acts

The Big Local programme has been an opportunity to build on the critical mass of 150 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 very different, hyper-local areas. The functions of support – peer support, technical expertise, skills development, adding capacity, guidance and information sharing, and relationship building – have been made available in various forms throughout the Big Local programme. However, they have been weighted differently as the programme has evolved. The final support phase, Make it Happen, has brought a range of new support offers pertinent to the ending of the programme, as well as a change to previous functions carried out by reps. Changes here have been a hot topic across the 15 case study areas, including concerns over the loss of support from reps with whom relationships have been built over many years in some cases, as new Area Coordinator roles have been introduced. A specific evaluation is assessing the impact of Make It Happen, and it is also too early for learning from the new approach through the Our Bigger Story research.

Here we have considered key questions around who decides on the priorities for support required, who selects the support providers, who takes up the available support, and what difference it has made. Big Local partnerships have accessed support through the programme-organised national offer and have also directed support themselves at the local level. Table 1 below outlines some of the pros and cons of these two approaches, both to Local Trust as the funder and to Big Local areas as the grantees. The relationship between the national and the local, and the implications for national funding bodies, is further addressed later in this section.

Table 1:
Assessing different approaches to support in the Big Local programme

	Who decides on the priorities for support?	Who chooses support providers?	Pros	Cons
Nationally: programme organised approach	Local Trust has tried to identify what was needed and when, informed in part by residents through surveys, event evaluations, monitoring of rep reports etc, as well as by the imperatives of programme delivery. Three distinct phases of the national support offer are outlined in section 2. Where Big Locals have faced critical times, Local Trust has stepped in with specific support, such as to help rebuild partnerships or untangle disputes between partnerships and LTOs.	Local Trust has chosen the support providers for the national offers, either through a selected commissioning process or through inviting organisations to apply to deliver specific types of support. For a time, Local Trust operated a marketplace which included a range of support providers from which Big Locals could choose. Local Trust appointed the Big Local reps (although one early cohort of reps went through an interview process with residents). In some cases, partnerships have selected their rep from a regional pool, in others Local Trust has allocated the rep.	**For Local Trust:** • National organisations are more geared up to widespread geographic provision • Can more easily draw on skilled facilitators for learning networks, etc. • Capacity to assess the quality and effectiveness of support offers • Can provide support that might push or challenge partnerships e.g., support on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion • Can use support to steer programme direction and activity **For Big Local areas:** • Costs are usually met by the programme • Local Trust has a wider pool of potential providers to draw from • Can put in place support that Big Locals might not think of for themselves e.g., free Zoom licences • Local Trust is valued as a custodian, there when necessary. • Provides access to information not otherwise readily available, e.g., Local Insight data, free Locality membership; practical advice from Local Trust re employment of staff	**For Local Trust:** • There has been little take up of some support – did Local Trust misjudge what was needed, or wanted? • Local Trust do not always know what happening on the ground • A challenge to make support offers timely for all areas **For Big Local areas:** • National support providers do not always understand how Big Locals operate – their pace, intermittent involvement of residents, etc. • May involve long distance travel • People are not always aware of what is on offer or understand the nature of the offer • Do not always get what they want

	Who decides on the priorities for support?	Who chooses support providers?	Pros	Cons
Locally: self-directed approach	Partnerships have identified the support they require, usually through partnership discussions and plan development/ reviews, though Big Local workers and reps may also have had an influence, and occasionally a LTO has made suggestions. Examples include residents themselves deciding they need some technical support, workers and/ or reps suggesting skills training, and an LTO proposing the need for support around policies and practice.	In some partnerships, residents and workers have sourced their own support – either someone they knew or through a local tendering process. One partnership felt quite strongly that they should be asked directly about the support required and that they should be able to source this locally. There is also a view that partnership members support each other and do not need national input.	**For Local Trust:** • Less organisational load • Not responsible for managing support offers and quality control • Frees up central resources for wider work, such as research and policy influence • Can be seen as in line with the resident-led ethos of the programme **For Big Local areas:** • Can recruit Big Local workers to dedicated roles, identified at a local level • Partnerships more confident that they can select someone who understands the local context • The support secured is specifically tailored to the Big Local's needs and felt to be more purposeful • A relationship may be built which outlives Big Local	**For Local Trust:** • Little control over type and quality of support available and accessed • May exacerbate inequalities across Big Locals in accessing support **For Big Local areas** • Not all partnerships are well networked/ have knowledge about support available locally • Partnerships 'do not know what they do not know' when it comes to support needs • May have to cover the costs themselves, manage a commissioning process, etc. • Places a management burden on partnerships in recruiting and liaising with local support providers • Some types of support may not be locally available/may have limited capacity

5.1 What determines uptake and outcome

From our discussions with Our Bigger Story areas, the uptake of support, whether nationally or locally organised, and likely outcomes, are related to three main factors.

First, Big Local areas are at *different starting points*. Some areas have an abundance of capabilities within their partnership and/or the local area and therefore seem to require very little additional support or external input. In contrast, some have looked for all the support they can get, whatever is on offer. Then, there are others who 'do not know what they do not know' and have therefore struggled to understand what support would be beneficial. Some of the more targeted support available through the recent 'Make it Happen' phase, for example, might have helped partnerships overcome hurdles and challenges earlier on and aided a speedier achievement of plan delivery. These starting points are related to capacity and confidence: many residents are very busy and engaged in a range of activities aside from Big Local and do not have the time to engage with support, or have home life responsibilities which get in the way of face-to-face activities. Some partnership members and workers can be somewhat inward looking and/or do not have the confidence that they will learn anything new from external support.

Second, *awareness and knowledge* of what support is available makes a difference. Respondents have not always been aware of the national support offers, for a range of reasons. Announcements via Workplace do not reach everyone – many people have said they do not use it. Additionally, when people do see promotional material, they are not always clear what is being offered. They may not understand it, or quite see how it might benefit their Big Local. Reps usually passed on information and in some cases promote particular support offers, though several have confirmed that they did not always do this, especially if they felt the partnership had enough to deal with otherwise. In turn, different levels of pre-existing awareness and knowledge within Big Local partnerships can shape the extent to which any gained information and learning

is cascaded, or whether it stays only with the individuals who access support. In a few areas, discussion about what has been learnt takes place so that the whole partnership can make decisions about how to act; in others there is little evidence that learning gained by a few is meaningfully shared with other partnership members.

And third, are more specific factors which shape the quality of engagement with potential support offers, around *relevance, trust, risk and value for money*. For Big Locals, support from an external source requires a foundation level of trust that a provider or offer will be relevant to their particular concern or community, accessible and comprehensible, and where the provider has the consistency and capacity to deliver expert support. This may be more of a challenge where the support need has been decided nationally, there is no previous relationship with the provider, or if they are perceived to be remote – they are identified as being from elsewhere and insufficiently tailored to local circumstances. Additionally, support offers may come at the wrong time for the Big Local's current preoccupations and priorities. Where a financial contribution from the Big Local is required, the stakes and risks are somewhat higher, and in these circumstances support offers are more likely to be taken up where there is a foreseeable return on the investment. Those with less knowledge or experience of the support tend to regard such offers as too expensive or not worth the money.

5.2 Balancing acts

We have seen from the literature (section 1) and the research undertaken with Big Locals (sections 2-4), 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. As table 1 above illustrates, there are pros and cons attached to both programme-organised and locally self-directed approaches, notwithstanding the blurred lines between the two. In Big Local, there has been an ongoing challenge of offering pertinent and accessible support at a national level for 150 very different, hyper-local areas, operating in different contexts and at different points of development at different

stages of the programme. The result is a series of tensions and balancing acts involved in providing support alongside funding in such a large, multi-dimensional programme as Big Local. There are five overlapping dimensions in play which the design and operation of any form of community-oriented programme has to navigate.

A national-local dimension. There are inherent contradictions in any national programme which, at its core values local resident-led development. At its most acute, this can be presented in the contrast between, on the one hand residents being told that power is in their hands, but on the other the centre playing an important role in deciding what support needs are prioritised. Local Trust wants to see Big Local areas succeed in their ambitions and fulfil the programme outcomes, and therefore steps in with the support it deems necessary to realise this aim. But inevitably some Big Local areas regard this as 'London talking', being too directive and interfering in local matters.

A related dichotomy of risk and control. The Big Local programme was hailed as a new way of working — 150 areas were to be allowed to spend their £1 million in whatever way they wanted. For some commentators, this was a risky proposition but from Local Trust's perspective, it was a risk worth taking, and managing. There is also an element of control on the part of Local Trust, which has arguably strengthened as time has gone on, as greater learning and awareness of risk has arisen. For example, community plan assessments have become much more stringent in order to have a more robust assessment of risk and to ensure due diligence around capital projects, and the underlying purpose of the Make it Happen support package is to ensure Big Locals complete the programme by 2026. Once again there is a complex balance to be struck. Some residents have expressed the desire for more input, in the form of firmer guidance, and even rules, while others want less interference from the centre and to be left alone. And there are lots of nuanced positions in between, with many pointing towards useful interventions from Local Trust, particularly at times of crisis.

Enabling flexibility and ensuring compliance. The Big Local programme involves multiple lines of formal and informal accountability, and this filters through into the function of programme support. Support has obvious and positive connotations, but also enables greater scrutiny and oversight of local activity. For example, the role of Big Local reps has shifted during the life of the programme, and the reps themselves interpreted their roles differently. They have been contracted by Local Trust but many reps felt accountable to the areas with whom they work. They often found themselves conflicted between on the one hand encouraging flexibility and resident control, and on the other being a reporting mechanism - 'eyes and ears' - for Local Trust.

The relationship between supply and demand. Local Trust has made available a whole raft of different support offers throughout the programme. In doing so, it has made some assumptions about what Big Local areas potentially needed at various phases of the programme's development and aimed to supply this. In the early years, some of these assumptions were based on learning from previous programmes, and were more universal in nature. Learning from local experience about support needs gradually increased over time. As discussed above, however, Big Local areas had different starting points and distinct development phases and trajectories. Demand for the support on offer at a particular point in time did not necessarily therefore match the expectations of Local Trust and some partnerships have commissioned their own supply of support as and when needed. More latterly, Local Trust has taken a more informed perspective and aimed to target tailored support to partnerships as appropriate.

Finally, there is a difficult balancing act between **expertise and relational support**. Big Local partnerships have benefited from specialist advice and information made available to them – for example on technical subjects or troubleshooting 'how to' guidance on difficult issues - but what they have said they have valued the most is support based on relationships. This might arise, for example, through mentoring, or coaching, and

a space for sharing experiences and reflection. Support appears to have been most effective where both expertise and a connection with the provider have been in place, such as through a rep or UnLtd link worker.

5.3 How might it be different?

Research participants have suggested a number of ways that support could have been organised differently within the programme. These have included:

Devolve resources

- a distributed support budget so that Big Locals could buy in their own support (suggestion made by partnerships);

- a regionally devolved structure where regional offices would work closely with Big Locals in their patch, providing expertise as needed. These regional offices could also hold the money instead of LTOs to *"cut out the middleman"* (proposal from Our Bigger Story workshop 2022);

- work more closely with local or regional voluntary and community sector infrastructure to source support (rep suggestion);

- Creation a regional reps pool to prevent dependency on one person (2016 Reps workshop proposal).

Central support

- a help desk so that partnerships could phone in or send an email and receive a listening ear and/ or a timely response (Our Bigger Story workshop 2022 comment);

- provide every area with templates for a common governance structure, code of conduct, GDPR, etc (Our Bigger Story workshop 2022 comment).

Consider relationships

- move reps around more frequently (*"positive disruption"*) so that they do not become too comfortable with the partnership and too close to the Big Local plan (2016 Reps workshop comment);

- a brokerage and facilitation service for peer-to-peer support arrangements (Our Bigger Story workshop 2022 comment);

- an opportunity for an interface between the support providers and the partnerships to test out possibilities and potential relationships (rep comment);

- a service level agreement regarding offers of support so that Big Local partnerships would be clear about the timescale, i.e., 'apply by x date, approved by x date, supplied by x date' (suggestion from a rep).

There are likely benefits and disbenefits to all of these ideas across all the grant recipients, and potentially another set of balancing acts to work with. Nevertheless, they illustrate some of the thinking that has taken place around support and are worthy of consideration in future national programmes. Indeed, some of Local Trust's recent practices, such as online events for Big Locals to meet 'Make it Happen' support providers, and the new Area Coordinator roles, indicate that there is some similar thinking at programme level.

5.4 Getting a delicate balance right

The forms of support available in the Big Local programme have ranged from access to relatively hands-off specialist expertise through to more intense handholding from reps, from Workplace posts through to peer learning networks, from guidance publications through to training programmes. In addition, many Big Local areas have used their money to source their own support and/or paid for a locally based worker to contribute skills and knowledge as well as create positive working relationships, and seen this as a good use of time and money. These support offers have aimed to reach and impact upon partnership chairs, partnership members, other local community activists and broader community members.

The extent to which individuals and partnerships and the wider community have benefited from the support provision has varied - across areas and over time. Our Bigger Story research has found that, for many, opportunities for face-to-face support have been critical and are felt to have given residents the confidence that they can make a difference to where they live. Indeed, the quality of the relationship between partnerships and support providers, whether at the local level (via reps and the LTO) or with national agencies has been as significant as the expertise on offer. The key to 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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Appendix: Media outputs 2022-23

Barrowcliff

- Barrowcliff Big Local On Ice - in this film residents explain why events like this are so important for Barrowcliff.

Catton Grove Big Local

- Making space for children and young people, - youth provision by Catton Grove Big Local

- Catton Grove Waterloo Park – the story of a Friends Group making a difference to their local park with the support of Big Local

Growing Together

- Clive Bacchus describes his involvement in Big Local and describes the difference it has made and his learning along the way. Film here

Hanwell

- Hanwell Fun Day – focus on Big Local work around the themes of community confidence and cohesion

Lawrence Weston

- Greening Lawrence Weston – improving the environment through a green energy project, green spaces, environmentally friendly housing and tackling fuel poverty

Northfleet

- Peter's story – the journey of one Big Local resident

- Change for People - the change that Big Local has made to a number of residents

Radstock and Westfield

- The power of Grants – how Big Local has used grants to develop and sustain small and large community initiatives

Ramsey

- The Pavilion, Ramsey – the value of a community hub

Revoe

3 podcasts to be published - on the impact of the cost of living crisis, around children and young people, and about community outreach

Three Parishes

- Legacy – as Big Local closes, this films records local legacies

- Be a Better Fish - Rural enterprise development

Whitley Bay Big Local

- Vera's Story, Carol's story; two films where residents discuss what Big Local has meant to them

- WBBL Tidy Town; Big Local Tidy Town worker and volunteers improving the environment

- Reflections on community hubs

- The community eco-hub entrance and ground floor

- The community eco-hub first and top floors

- Whitley Bay community eco-hub: a view from the outside

- WBBL community eco-hub: managing the development process

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