

Understanding success in Big Local

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

July 2024



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Big Local is a resident-led funding programme providing people in 150 areas in England with £1.15m each to spend across 10-15 years to create lasting change in their neighbourhoods. The programme is run by place-based funder Local Trust, 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](#).

Acknowledgements

Particular thanks to the 15 Big Local study areas:

- Barrowcliff
- Birchfield
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- Lawrence Weston
- Northfleet North
- Radstock and Westfield
- Ramsey
- Three Parishes
- Westfield Estate
- Whitley Bay

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Glossary

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 2023, 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 on the issues Local Trust had picked up from Big Local partnerships, including coastal communities, housing and being a Big Local chair.

Community Leadership Academy (CLA): Provides support for the people making changes in their communities. It helps them to develop and share skills and knowledge that can benefit the whole community. Created in 2020, it was delivered through a partnership comprising Koreo, the Young Foundation and Northern Soul.

'Left behind' areas: 'Left behind' neighbourhoods are 225 wards across England that were identified through research conducted by Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion (OCSI) for Local Trust in 2019. These areas were classified as 'left behind' because they fall within the most deprived ten per cent of areas on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) and also lack social infrastructure (defined as places and spaces to meet, an active and engaged community, and transport and digital connectivity).

Locally Trusted Organisation (LTO): An 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 LTO depending on the plan and the skills and resources required.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Big Local is a national programme which provides funding and support for resident-led change in 150 hyper-local areas in England. Starting in 2011, each area was given access to £1.15m and a programme of support over a 10-15 year period. Big Local was designed to be radically different from other programmes, in that funding could be spent over a decade or more, at communities' own pace, and according to their own plans and priorities. Beyond the creation of a resident-led partnership and the production of a community-led vision and accompanying Big Local plan for each area, the programme had four broad overarching outcomes:

1. Communities will be better able to identify local needs and take action in response to them.
2. People will have increased skills and confidence, so that they continue to identify and respond to needs in the future.
3. The community will make a difference to the needs it prioritises.
4. The area will be an even better place to live.

Given the non-prescriptive and flexible nature of Big Local, how will and should it be judged? Since 2015, a multi-media, longitudinal evaluation – Our Bigger Story – has been working alongside the programme, following the progress of 15 case study Big Local areas. In 2023-24, the **evaluation examined how success is and can be understood in Big Local**. Accordingly, this report explores how different stakeholders understand success, whilst also considering the distance travelled over time towards each of the four broad outcomes above, and what factors or conditions might have helped or hindered progress.

The material for this report comes from three sources: 1) re-analysis of all data collected for each case study area during the nine years of the research project; 2) conversations with workers and residents in Big Local areas to ask about their perceptions of success; and 3) interviews with key individuals who have been involved in the funding, management and delivery of the Big Local programme.

Identifying success in Big Local

Success in a programme like Big Local is inevitably a multi-faceted and complex matter. The 150 areas are all hugely different from each other in terms of their histories, contexts, starting points and own vision for success. Conversation about 'success' within Big Local soon surfaces a variety of perspectives on what success means and looks like, depending on stakeholders' position within the programme (e.g., residents, Big Local partnerships and Local Trust staff and trustees), the level at which success is viewed (e.g. programme, community, individual), and assessments made at different points of time.

All 15 Our Bigger Story areas have made progress against the four outcomes in one way or another. Even within the areas that have been more challenged in delivering their aspirations and, indeed, struggled to see themselves as successful, a broad community vision

has been sustained over many years, and there is evidence of more skilled and confident individuals and some stronger community groups because of Big Local.

Success can also be considered in terms of whether steps towards the achievement of the four Big Local outcomes have in turn led to the increased agency, or power, at the local level. There is some evidence to support this proposition across the 15 Our Bigger Story areas. **Areas that have made the greatest progress in terms of the outcomes were, as they reach the end of the programme, also more able to demonstrate agency.** Whilst some success can be identified in all areas, some have made far less progress against the four outcomes, and relatively little seems to have shifted in terms of power and agency. Fourteen years in, the Big Local journey has clearly been smoother for some than for others. Understanding why this variation exists can help us to understand what enables or constrains success in resident-led change.

Exploring variations in success across Big Local areas

Some of the 15 Big Local areas in the evaluation were **able to make more of the opportunities available to them** through the programme. Consequently, they illustrated greater progress than others towards the four outcomes, and towards having greater agency. Comparative (qualitative) analysis identified **seven conditions and four ways of working which were instrumental in shaping the prospects for success.**

Conditions

1. **Basic demographic and socio-economic characteristics:** There was no clear pattern between the type of area (rural, urban, or coastal), predominant type of housing, or existing levels of deprivation and an area's ability to make progress on the four outcomes. Whilst none of the most deprived communities were amongst those that had moved furthest towards the four outcomes, equally none were within those that had made least progress. That is not to say that deprivation does not matter – it can have real implications for the resources communities have to hand. It suggests that it is not a straightforward relationship, and not a significant factor distinguishing areas which were more or less able to make progress on Big Local outcomes.
2. **Levels of community activity:** The number and connectedness of active groups, organisations and individual volunteers within an area, were important to the success of Big Local. In general, those areas that were deemed to be most successful in terms of progress towards the four Big Local outcomes all now have high levels of community activity. Equally, those areas that were least able to make progress towards the four outcomes tended to have much lower levels of community activity.
3. **Community leadership:** An area's chances of success in achieving the four outcomes were related to the strength of community leadership, by which is meant more than just the presence or absence of individual community leaders. Community leadership encompasses the wider groups of people, structures, and processes of working together to make things happen. Although it was not always the case that the most successful areas had distributed leadership amongst a wide group of residents, leadership in these areas was mostly configured in such a way that there was clear direction from the partnership, some devolved decision-making, and power was shared.
4. **Relationships with others:** The nature and quality of relationships that areas, particularly Big Local partnerships, had with other bodies, including local authorities and larger voluntary sector organisations, has also proved to be important. Areas that were most successful in terms of achieving the four outcomes tended to have strong relationships with such 'external' organisations. Few areas started off with strong relationships, but a clear difference emerged between those areas which had been able to build these relationships over time and those which had struggled to do so, and this in turn affected their ability to make progress on the four Big Local outcomes.

5. **Collective identity:** Those areas that had achieved the most expressed a strong sense of collective identity with the designated Big Local area. For some, this was evident at the outset of the programme. But for others it was enhanced across the duration of the programme, often through concerted efforts to develop an identity within the Big Local area. For example, Big Local events such as galas, carnivals and markets were organised, which alongside flagship projects such as parks and community hubs, helped to build a sense of belonging and pride in the area.
6. **Community controlled spaces:** Areas considered to be most successful in terms of achieving the four outcomes have had or created access to community spaces – generally buildings – which are, to some extent at least, under their control if not ownership. Those areas that have struggled were less likely to have access to or control over community buildings or other useable spaces. Whilst this pattern is evident, it is also clear that having a building was no guarantee of success.
7. **Individuals' skills and capabilities:** Across all areas it is possible to identify individuals whose skills and capabilities have been developed through Big Local. But the areas that have been most successful tended to have a network of skilled individuals actively involved in the community already or that such a network was realised through the programme. Some Big Local areas have specifically given individuals the opportunity to develop personally and professionally, and this has been counted as one of the area's own self-defined success criteria.

These seven conditions could also be considered sets of resources that Big Local areas either already had or built through the programme, which together shaped the possibilities of success. No one condition alone could account for the success or otherwise of a Big Local area, and the presence or absence of one may be offset by another.

Ways of working

Even when taken together, these seven conditions could not account for all the variation in the success of Big Local areas in meeting outcomes. It was also apparent that **the ways in which the residents approached and delivered Big Local was also crucial for success**. Consequently, **four ways of working have been identified which served to enable or constrain the chances of success**.

1. The **establishment of robust governance structures** which facilitated collective decision-making, encouraged wider forms of resident engagement across the area, and which effectively devolved power, was identified as a key enabler of success.
2. Areas differed in the extent to which they **acted strategically** by working collectively and flexibly to research, develop and then be guided by a clear vision for the area, building and drawing upon research and evidence on local needs, identifying actions that would meet those needs and fit within the vision.
3. How Big Local areas **engaged with effective support** through the programme and made the most of the resources and opportunities available to them, mattered for their chances of success in relation to progress on the four outcomes. Less engagement with effective support could get in the way of progress towards outcomes, even when other conditions were favourable.
4. How areas **managed conflict** and the inevitable tensions that arise in the process of long-term, resident-led change could have a significant influence on the chances of success. Some areas were able to work with or around any tensions in a way which became less disruptive of successful progress towards achieving outcomes. For others, entrenched conflicts made it more difficult to make progress regardless of the wider resources available.

Conclusions: learning about success

Big Local has given communities the space to build, and in some cases rebuild, structures, plans and action. It has also changed mindsets in communities. Residents have demonstrated an understanding of what investment over the long-term can look like.

Analysis of success in Big Local through the Our Bigger Story evaluation demonstrates three things. First, that **all areas had made progress towards each of the Big Local outcomes**. Second, those areas making the clearest progress against the outcomes were also those which had increased agency, suggesting that these **outcomes are important steps along the way to greater power and agency for communities** as the ultimate impact of Big Local. Third, **'success' in these terms was variable over time and between areas**. Some areas had been able to make and sustain greater progress against more of the outcomes. This helped in influencing wider local decisions.

No one condition or way of working alone could explain why certain areas were more successful than others in terms of progress against the four Big Local outcomes. It is the combination of factors interacting in complex ways which is influential. Even when partnerships seemed to have everything stacked in their favour – high levels of community activity, skilled individuals, and access to community buildings, for example – progress towards the four outcomes could be disrupted by not establishing robust governance structures, not acting strategically or ongoing conflicts. Similarly, areas that might be lacking in some of the influential resources, might build them through acting strategically after engaging with effective support, and those growing resources may then support their progress towards the four Big Local outcomes. This point also illustrates **the cumulative and iterative nature of many of these different factors – they can be seen as both resources that areas needed and as early outcomes of their engagement with the programme.**

Whilst no one factor alone could account for variations in success, **arguably (as is, perhaps, often the case) the most critical success factor was the engagement of skilled, capable individuals.** There were clearly identifiable individuals that other participants would point to as being particularly instrumental in the success of the programme locally. These individuals included residents (usually partnership members) and Big Local workers as the people who drove Big Local but who also took a wider group of residents with them on the journey. They helped to ensure that the community vision was collectively held and developed pathways enabling residents to grow community activity, build relationships, configure leadership, create community-controlled spaces and generate a sense of collective identity.

Introduction

1.1. Background

Big Local is a national programme which provides funding and support for resident-led change in 150 hyperlocal areas in England. Each area was given access to £1.15m and a programme of support over a 10-15 year period. The programme started in 2011 and for most of that time has been run by place-based funder Local Trust. They believe there is a need to put more resources, decision-making, and power into the hands of local communities, to enable them to improve their lives and the places in which they live.

From the outset, Big Local was designed to be radically different from other funding programmes. Contrasting with conventional, top-down, time-limited, project-led funding, awards were made to Big Local areas on the basis that the funding could be spent over a decade or more, at communities' own pace, and according to their own plans and priorities (Local Trust, 2024).

Most funded regeneration and community development programmes define success in terms of targets and performance indicators, outputs and outcomes. For instance, the package of urban regeneration programmes that sat under the banner of the *National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal* under the 1997-2010 New Labour governments, including the *New Deal for Communities* programme, *Neighbourhood Renewal Fund* and *Neighbourhood Wardens*, used a combination of locally-identified targets for improving key areas, and national 'floor targets' across six domains of employment, education, health, housing, liveability and crime (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001; Lupton et al., 2013). The 2010-2015 Conservative-led Coalition government-funded *Community Organisers* programme (2011-2014) was a much smaller initiative but still came with its own quantitative targets, including to recruit 500 Trainee Community Organisers, who would recruit a further 4,500 Volunteer Community Organisers, and identify three to five fledgling projects that could be supported by emerging community networks (Cameron et al., 2015).

The focus on outcomes as measures of success in public policy has been challenged from different positions. Existing literature on success and its measurement in voluntary and community action and development point to specific measures of forms of community capital – political, social, human, cultural, natural, financial and built – and to the importance of process indicators relating to levels of empowerment (Jacobs, 2007; Boisvert et al., 2008). Some authors note or critique the over-use of numerical outputs and outcomes, such as those in the government programmes above, which risk underplaying complex community outcomes, and stress the effect of ideological and political principles in selecting such evaluation criteria (Barman, 2007; Kemp et al.,

2007; Pugalis, 2013). Craig (2002) suggests an approach which reflects the value base of community development and the goals of empowerment, emphasising meaningful participation, continuous community learning, and an awareness of community power dynamics. Whilst these debates are not new, they highlight the need to understand success primarily from a local perspective and to emphasise outcomes which have meaning for local residents.

In contrast to many government-led initiatives like those described above, the Big Local programme had very few pre-determined outputs or outcomes, beyond the creation of a resident-led partnership and the production of a community-led vision and accompanying Big Local plan for each area. Its overarching outcomes were unusually broad. Four outcomes were set by the National Lottery Community Fund at the outset of the programme:

1. Communities will be better able to identify local needs and take action in response to them.
2. People will have increased skills and confidence, so that they continue to identify and respond to needs in the future.
3. The community will make a difference to the needs it prioritises.
4. The area will be an even better place to live.

Big Local areas came up with their own priorities for action within the framework of these high-level outcomes, largely based on input from residents. Unlike in some previous programmes, Big Local areas were not required to submit detailed quantitative monitoring data, though LTOs did submit regular financial reports and partnerships reflected on their progress via plan reviews, and feedback to and from Big Local reps and area advisors.

Previous research and reports on the Big Local programme have examined aspects of success in different ways over the years, in terms of critical success factors and progress towards outcomes. *Big Local: The Early Years* found that partnerships commonly identified teamwork, leadership, and 'sharing the load' as factors in helping them make progress towards their goal (James et al., 2014). *Big Local: Beyond the Early Years* (McCabe et al., 2017) described movement towards each outcome, noting progress in: consultation activities in the development stage; developing confidence, skills and capacity among residents, partnerships, and local groups; improving wellbeing and physical spaces; and an increase in local activities, cohesion and perception. In *The Legacy of Big Local* (Local Trust, 2018), Big Local areas identified five themes that described the successful legacy they wished to have: creating a stronger civil society, bringing the community together, greater skills and confidence for residents, investing in children and young people as future community leaders, and being able to sustain activities. *Big Local as Change Agent* (McCabe et al., 2020) focused on the role of resource mobilisation, local knowledge, commitment and passion, and making use of convening and coordinating powers to achieve resident-led change. Finally, *Building Big Local Futures* (Wilson et al., 2022a) looked at how power was being successfully fostered in Big Local areas through the development of agency, organisation, effective relationships and resources of money and time. Across all these reports, building and making use of existing local skills, knowledge, and leadership have been identified both as key enablers and indicators of success for the programme.

In this report, we consider the concept of success in the context of the Big Local ethos: namely that residents should have a say in what success looks like. We did not set out with specific criteria for success. Rather, we have explored how different stakeholders understand success, whilst also considering the distance travelled over time towards

each of the four broad outcomes above, and what factors or conditions might have helped or hindered progress.

1.2. Our approach

Since it commenced in 2015, the Our Bigger Story multi-media, longitudinal evaluation has focused on different issues and themes each year. In 2023, we set out to explore the notion of success across the 15 Our Bigger Story areas. To do this, we analysed existing data, collected through the evaluation since 2015, whilst also generating new evidence on the theme of success.

First, we analysed all data collected for each area during the nine years of the research project. This included reviewing interviews, area plans and reports, partnership meeting records, as well as film and online content produced by the Our Bigger Story team and the partnerships themselves. We produced a review document for each area based on a set of questions examining the original goals of each partnership, how these had changed, what had been achieved, how this was evidenced, how partnership members and others perceived success, and what factors acted as barriers or enablers to progress.

Second, we spoke with workers and residents in Big Local areas to ask about their perceptions of success and to check our initial analysis of what success looks like at programme, area, and individual level.

Finally, we interviewed key individuals in and around Local Trust to understand how they viewed success at a national programme level. This included interviews with current staff and trustees, as well as people involved in the early years of the programme.

Alongside considering evidence against each of the four Big Local outcomes for all the 15 areas, we undertook comparative analysis by grouping areas together according to their varying degrees of progress against the four Big Local outcomes. We used these groupings to explore different factors which help to explain this variation.

This allowed us to consider whether particular factors might be associated with different types of success in Big Local areas and how the importance of these factors may have changed over time. As our analysis developed, additional factors were identified. Early findings were shared and tested at the 2024 Our Bigger Story residential workshop in March 2024, as part of a wider set of facilitated discussions about success in Big Local, helping to further refine the analysis. This report distils the key findings, helping to shed light on how success is and can be understood in Big Local.

Identifying success in Big Local

By 2024, many Big Local partnerships had used all their money, or were getting close to doing so. Some have created follow-on governance structures. Some have closed down. With two years to go until Big Local closes in 2026, there are inevitable questions about whether Big Local has been a success and what might illustrate this. At first glance, it appears to be a straightforward question and answer: all areas fulfilled the criteria for establishing a partnership and creating an action plan. We can point to numerous examples of amazing projects that have been delivered, such as new community events being run, community buildings, playgrounds, and even new energy infrastructure.

The reality, however, is much more complex. First, the 150 areas are all very different from each other in terms of their histories, contexts, and starting points, with inevitable implications for understandings of success. Second, the ethos of the programme is that communities themselves should identify their own vision for success, what is needed in their area and the relevant approaches to making the change they feel is needed. Their trajectories are inevitably different. Any assessment of success needs to be understood with regards to the context each Big Local works within. Conversation about 'success' within Big Local soon surfaces a variety of perspectives on what success means and looks like. There are differences in how success is understood by different stakeholders within the programme, at different levels (e.g. programme, community, individual), and at different points over time.

2.1. Success according to whom?

At its most basic, success is understood by some people associated with the programme as keeping going and spending the money within the timeframe available. For others it is about how a community has worked together from the beginning to the end of the programme, and relationships built within the community and with external stakeholders. As one participant who had worked on the programme in its early stages commented:

I think success for me was more about the process, and now I look and see what some of the communities are doing or have done, it feels like it's worked ... people were stepping forward to make a difference in their community. And I think that's probably the biggest success of the programme, is the confidence it gave people.

Then there are those who describe success in terms of outputs and outcomes or the distance travelled from a starting point. Some refer to success in terms of how much additional money or other resource has been leveraged into an area as a result of Big Local activity, and what will stay:

*Success for me would be that overlap between social impact and sustainability.
(Big Local partnership member)*

Others have pointed to what has been left behind as a legacy of Big Local, such as an increase in knowledgeable and skilled residents and/or the creation of locally accountable governance structures:

I think that to me is not about outputs and outcomes, it's about the mindset and about that resilience of people around the table coming together and continuing on the work that they've been doing for years. (Big Local worker)

Many people associated with the programme feel uncomfortable talking about 'success'. Some of the research participants have stressed that such talk can lead on to talk of 'failure' and have found this unhelpful. Conversely, others have called for more discussion of failure, based on the argument that it can generate real learning. Success and failure are not seen as mutually exclusive, and all Big Local areas are likely to be able to point to things that worked well and things that worked less well, and why this might be. In addition, when the ideas around the Big Local programme were being formed, primarily as an approach that would target funding to areas that were seen as not receiving their share of lottery funding, the Big Lottery Fund (now the National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF)) also became interested in testing out, and learning from, a model of resident-led decision making, rather than necessarily defining what would count as successful or not. Residents from some Big Local areas have said that they appreciated the space in which to get things wrong and try again, which has only been possible because of the philosophy and approach behind the programme.

It is therefore unsurprising that there are many different interpretations of success. In part these variations were influenced by people's different positions within the programme: whether they were trustees or staff at the national level in Local Trust, workers or reps at the area level, or residents within or outside of Big Local partnerships. Local Trust staff and trustees for example, were partly focused on the smooth delivery of the programme. But they were also concerned with processes of community change – the effects on individuals involved, community group development and relationships with external stakeholders – as were many of the Big Local partnership members.

Partnerships also tended to look at whether they had met the goals described in their plans and rated their success in terms of legacy and ability to continue the model of resident-led development. In some cases, partnerships were also anxious that residents would judge them on whether or not they had achieved particular physical and tangible projects, irrespective of anything else achieved. As this suggests, views of success were also then influenced by the lens through which success is considered: whether the focus is on the programme as a whole, Big Local areas, or success for individual residents.

2.2. Success at what level: programme, community or individual levels?

It is worth examining success at different levels a little more closely. It is possible for the programme to be viewed as successful at one level and not at other levels. For example, evidence of increased skills and confidence could be seen as success at the level of individual residents, but those changes might not add up to successful outcomes at the programme level. On the other hand, the programme could be deemed to be successful because it has distributed its resources within the prescribed timeframe, yet without making much difference in communities or for individuals within them. Research participants for the evaluation were generally enthusiastic about the

success of Big Local at all levels, but were keen to highlight that success means different things at programme, area and individual level.

At the **programme level**, Local Trust staff and trustees were mindful of delivering Big Local in the spirit intended by the NLCF, as well as ensuring all the funding was spent and benefitted the 150 areas by 2026. Big Local was a bold experiment to see what could be learnt about hyper-local community development when residents were in the lead, and in tune with this. Furthermore, a trustee of Local Trust pointed to the knowledge and learning gained about what has worked as a key outcome of the programme. The 125 research reports (as of March 2024) commissioned by Local Trust and available on its [website](#) contribute to an evidence base that illustrates the value of resident-led decision-making and the power to make change that is created when communities have control over some resources. There was also an acknowledgment that while some external stakeholders, such as policy makers and funders, perceived the resident-led nature of the programme to be a risk, the fact that residents had not squandered the money illustrated success at programme level. Programme level success was also understood in terms of its ability to have facilitated success at the area level, through the provision of money and support (see Wilson et al., 2023 for further discussion on the importance of support as a key element of the Big Local programme):

It's not just about giving money to 150 areas. It's having an overall wrap around programme that goes with that, of support. (Local Trust trustee)

Residents in Big Local areas tended to think about success at programme level in terms of the support that they felt Local Trust provided them, both in terms of short-term practical support and guidance to facilitate their own engagement with the programme but also in terms of longer term 'support' to communities through influencing the policy agenda.

At the **area level**, Big Local staff, partnerships and residents provided many examples of achievements within their Big Local areas. They pointed to tangible legacies such as new or improved community buildings, play areas and environmental improvements. In some cases, these physical assets and spaces were the realisation of long held dreams and established community confidence that residents could drive change. However, if seeing is believing, then not achieving a flagship project can have a negative effect. For example, in one area the partnership is aware that, despite everything else it has achieved, it could be deemed a failure if it does not get a particular project over the line.

Additionally, and as previously illustrated (Wilson et al., 2022b), success has been about more than the completion of tangible, shiny new projects. This is amply demonstrated in an improved sense of community identity and pride, and strengthened relationships across community groups within the area and between residents and wider institutions. Residents have commented on there being a greater sense of community:

It's changed the community enormously ... it's brought community groups together.

It's absolutely amazing ... all the community getting together.

This has been substantiated by agencies working in Big Local communities. A youth worker in one area commented that there was less of a 'done to' approach, where the community was the focus of externally determined intervention; instead, there was a greater level of trust. A service provider in another area talked about the galvanising power of Big Local to support activities that improved the area.

At the **individual level**, success was talked about in terms of individual residents having grown in terms of confidence, knowledge and skills. As one Our Bigger Story participant summarised:

[It has been] amazing to watch people's journeys across time and how they have developed. It has been individuals and within the group too; seeing that change across a long period of time.

Stories of personal development are many. They have ranged from people describing how they have become more confident and less isolated as a result of their participation as beneficiaries in Big Local activities, through to those who have transformed their lives through taking on leadership roles in a supportive environment. Such examples are evident across all age groups and amongst people from various walks of life. One young person spoke of their experience of moving from a situation where they had few friends, struggled to communicate and refused to go to school to now being a qualified youth worker and community volunteer. Similarly, there are examples of older residents who previously had little going on in their lives and are now leading lights in their partnerships and project development.

Big Local has invested in people because, as one partnership member said: “*by investing in individuals they actually grow*”. For some residents, this has been in a voluntary capacity, for some it has been through paid work opportunities (including as Big Local workers) and in several of the 15 Our Bigger Story areas, people have progressed to become local councillors. These councillors have cited their experience of Big Local and their resulting knowledge of the area and local issues, as well as their improved understanding of power and decision-making, as informing their new governance roles.

Together, the individual and area level achievements can be directly related back to the original four programme outcomes (explored further in section 2.4 below), though as time has gone on, partnerships have added further examples of success at the local level, such as the leveraging of additional funding into the area and the more powerful relationships they hold with a wider range of agencies.

2.3. Success at what point?

A unique feature of the Big Local programme has been its duration, with most areas active in some form since 2012. Given this, at what point should success be assessed? Indeed, can judgements be made about the programme at any one moment in time, such as the mid-point or end point? The Big Local programme is a complex and dynamic programme, and not only does its management and support change, more importantly communities fluctuate over time (Wilson et al., 2022b, p.20), and Big Local partnerships have been through ups and downs. This has often been a cyclical process rather than a continuous, linear and upward trajectory.

Big Local areas have felt more or less successful at different points in time since they first engaged with the programme and may have a different view of success in 2024 compared to the one held, say, ten years previously, or ten years hence. In one area, for example, a partnership that successfully worked with a variety of external agencies to fund significant environmental improvements is in 2024 feeling despondent that the local authority has not maintained the area and it is once again overgrown and inaccessible. In another area, a partnership that was thrilled to take on the management of a council-owned community building is now facing a decision to hand it back as it is proving financially unsustainable. In other areas, long-running trials and tribulations associated with gaining planning permission or finding match funding are finally behind them and communities can at last see projects delivered.

The long-term nature of the programme has meant that the operating context for communities has changed. There have been internal factors such as maintaining momentum as partnership members have come and gone, dealing with occasional tensions within partnerships, and projects that have not worked out as anticipated. Partnerships have also reported that as they did more, they identified more and varied community needs that required a different response to those already planned. A Big Local delivery partner stated that:

We identified that about 60% of people using the Foodbank have mental health problems so that is something we want to do something about.

In addition, just as partnerships were beginning their work, other local services were facing cuts in the government's programme of austerity, which affected Big Local plans and priorities. In the Our Bigger Story case study areas, there were several examples of partnerships prioritising young people's provision and spaces as statutory provision was cut back. And in 2020 partnerships had to deal with the local consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, Big Local areas have been on a sometimes-uneven path. There have been external ups and downs as well as internal highs and lows at various points in the Big Local journey not just for areas, but also at programme level. All long-term programmes are subject to a changing environment, the impact of which is unlikely to be anticipated at the start of a programme. Like Big Local Areas, Local Trust has had to be responsive, flexible and to morph as necessary to meet unforeseen challenges, such as its swift switch to remote working for all staff just before the first lockdown in 2020 so that they could continue to support Big Local areas during the pandemic.

Further, a key question is whether a Big Local area can be described as successful only if it continues to do what it was doing beyond the duration of the programme itself. This could, for example, include maintaining a resident-led ethos, with residents continuing to work together to identify needs and to take action to meet them long after the programme funding and support has finished. Assessing the success of Big Local in these terms will only be possible some years after the programme has ended.

2.4. Success in terms of the four Big Local outcomes

The discussion so far highlights the potential for tensions in understanding success, with different views evident depending upon who is making the judgment, at what level, and at what point in time. At the same time as acknowledging these tensions, the four Big Local outcomes, as envisioned by NLCF at the outset of the programme, provided a guiding framework for discussions of success. The focus of our analysis for the purposes of this report has, therefore, been on these four outcomes. They have enabled communities to determine for themselves specific measures as well as assessments of success, through the creation, and reflections on delivery of their community plans. Our focus, then, is predominantly on the area level, although the outcomes also pay attention to change for individuals, whilst also implicitly drawing attention to programme level support. The four outcomes of the Big Local programme are:

1. Communities will be better able to identify local needs and take action in response to them.
2. People will have increased skills and confidence, so that they continue to identify and respond to needs in the future.
3. The community will make a difference to the needs it prioritises.
4. The area will be an even better place to live.

All 15 Our Bigger Story areas have made progress against the four outcomes in one way or another. Although we reported in 2016 that many “*struggled with what constitutes sufficiently robust evidence of progress against, or achievement of, outcomes*” (McCabe et al., 2017, p.19), partnerships have generally become more adept at demonstrating change, whilst still recognising that some things are more difficult to quantify, including “*that feelgood factor*”. Even within the areas that have been more challenged in delivering their aspirations and, indeed, struggled to see themselves as successful, they have sustained a broad community vision over many years, and there is evidence of more skilled and confident individuals and some stronger community groups because of Big Local.

All Big Local partnerships in Our Bigger Story, then, have had some success. This should be understood in the context of the programme and criteria for selection of the areas, which was based on intelligence that there were many areas of the country that needed a step up through funding and support to attract and make use of resources that could make a difference in their communities. The discussion below outlines what we have learnt about notions of success in relation to the four Big Local outcomes.

Illustrations of success in relation to the Big Local four outcomes

Outcome 1: Communities will be better able to identify local needs and take action in response to them

Partnerships that have been successful in terms of making progress on this outcome have had an ongoing approach to consultation, visioning and planning. They have listened to residents’ concerns and ideas, organised collective discussion and undertaken regular reviews of plans and priorities. In some areas the consultation has taken the form of street surveys and conversations with residents at public events, while in others it has been through doorstep conversations or weekly community drop-ins. One area established a system and associated procedures for identifying needs, overseen by the partnership, and took this learning into other governance structures within the area.

More informal community engagement to identify needs has been a feature of most areas, but important factors in meeting this outcome relate to the breadth of reach across the community and a partnership process where needs have been evidenced, discussed and acted upon. Partnerships that have been successful in terms of making progress on this outcome have also been proactive in supporting residents to take action around the issues that matter to them.

A partnership member described their experience as a learning curve in terms of gaining a better understanding of what to do and how to help. One partnership saw itself as an enabler for other things to happen, and its community hub as a launch pad for residents to act on their ideas. Another noted that they were able to act and react quickly to emerging issues because they had done the background work in identifying needs and had readily available funding if needed – they were in the right place at the right time with a plan ready to go and the contacts to make it happen. Most if not all areas illustrated aspects of this outcome during the pandemic (Ellis Paine et al., 2022) though some responded more effectively than others. A councillor in one Big Local area commented: “*It’s the local level leadership, delivery, that’s the key to this being such a success, they understand what’s going on out there, they know what people are looking for*”.

Key indicators of success in this area include:

- A proactive and robust approach that gathers diverse views, i.e., reach across the whole community.

- A structure that facilitates listening and action.
- A governance process that embraces discussion and negotiation.

Outcome 2: People will have increased skills and confidence, so that they continue to identify and respond to needs in the future

Partnerships that have been successful in terms of making progress on this outcome have been able to evidence the involvement of a growing number of people supported to be active in governance and leadership roles. There are many examples of people who were completely new to community action and, in their words: “*wouldn’t have had a clue before*”, who have grown in confidence, as noted by one partnership member:

Most of the people on the partnership have never been to a meeting, never mind being involved in something like Big Local with £1m and it’s a big ask to get them to think about how they spend that. Once they got their heads round that ... they could do it.

One resident who thought at the start that Big Local was “a load of bunkum” reflected on how everyone had learnt more than they thought possible. A relative newcomer to a Big Local partnership confirmed that: “I’m now confident in going for funding and stuff like that... so, I can now hold that conversation... it [Big Local] gives you a greater understanding of how [the community] works.

Big Local has offered a range of opportunities for residents to develop their knowledge and skills. People have spoken about how they became more sure of themselves through participation in governance processes such as the assessment of applications for small grants. This also taught people how to compile better bids themselves, therefore enhancing their ability to raise income to meet community needs in the future. Success can also be seen in the many residents who had never been involved with anything like Big Local before and have been encouraged and supported to become community activists, local councillors, trustees of local organisations and paid Big Local workers.

Key indicators of success in this area include:

- Residents from all walks of life participating in governance, as well as community action.
- Community development support which provides opportunities for people to learn and develop.
- A variety of ways in which to engage with Big Local, forming a pathway to community leadership.

Outcome 3: The community will make a difference to the needs it prioritises

Partnerships that have successfully made progress on this outcome have been able to demonstrate their ability to meet the needs that they had identified through focus, planning, patience, collaboration and funding.

All partnerships have created a number of Big Local community plans over the years, and there is evidence that Big Local partnerships have made a positive contribution towards at least some of their priorities, e.g., the local environment has been improved, play areas have been created, there is increased footfall around local shopping areas, or more people are active in their community. The Big Local money has been significant in enabling partnerships to realise their ambitions: “*If we hadn’t had the money, then the situation now would be very different*” (local organisation).

But it's not all about the money. Early in the programme, several partnerships acknowledged that their initial priorities were perhaps too ambitious and that some priorities could never be fully met in the way they had anticipated and/or that achievements would take a lot longer than originally thought. However, there is evidence from within the community and from external agencies that Big Local partnerships have contributed to progress, such as reduced isolation of older people and increased engagement of young people. Partnership members have talked about learning to be a "*patient presence*," waiting for planning bureaucracy to be worked through and finding who best to work with in the local authority, for example. There has been substantial community influence over other agencies' agendas in shaping service provision and directing it to where it was needed most.

The ten-year plus timeframe has been important. Many of the differences made were not in evidence in year three, or year five, or indeed year seven of the Big Local programme. There are capital projects as well as community development projects that were only deemed to be successful towards the end of the programme. Some even say they are only just finding latterly that projects are settling in and starting to feel successful. Residents have shown great persistence and patience, maintaining focus and enthusiasm for change while facing repeated challenges. Significant to those areas that are seen to be successful is the sustainability of the differences made.

Key indicators of success in this area include:

- Sustainable responses and solutions to community-identified needs.
- A community infrastructure with the capability to influence policy and service providers.
- Enduring energy and commitment to making a difference whatever the challenges.

Outcome 4: The area will be an even better place to live

Success in relation to progress on this final outcome has been demonstrated where communities appear to have generated palpable energy for change, where people come together more and feel more control over community life. However, because the outcome is quite broad and subjective, it is difficult to assess. Nonetheless, the Our Bigger Story evaluation has listened to residents' perspectives on change in their neighbourhood, village or town and found that in some Big Local areas, the number and range of people expressing the feeling that their area has become a better place to live, illustrates some progress towards the outcome.

Those residents who have participated the most in Big Local tend to be more positive about the area being better, although there is also evidence that residents who are more on the margins of involvement in Big local (i.e., those without a direct stake in Big Local) have talked about the community feeling better. The appearance of an area also has a psychological impact. One partnership member commented that their town was looking better (influenced by Big Local) which had raised people's morale and created a feel-good factor. More tangible evidence regarding this outcome was apparent in at least a couple of Our Bigger story areas. For example, social media posts about a town have been increasingly positive; there is competition for shop leases rather than empty shops; and more people want to move to the area because it is vibrant - they see a lot going on.

As noted earlier, context and timing are important. The Big Local programme has run alongside continuing public finance austerity measures. One respondent questioned how their area could be a better place to live when residents were living in a sea of deprivation, facing the cost-of-living crisis and watching local services closing down. Another, however, countered that while Big Local was ultimately a small drop in a big

ocean, it has enabled communities to alleviate some of the worst effects of economic deprivation and the withdrawal of some state services. It was also noted that when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the community responded in a way that would not have happened before Big Local.

More positively, the local policy context also provided windows of opportunity for some Big Local partnerships. In one area, a community-led masterplan influenced the local authority just as it was planning regeneration in the town. The resulting improvements led to national press coverage, and whilst Big Local could not claim total ownership, the partnership felt that had contributed and helped to make the area a better place to live.

As with the third outcome, the sustainability of change, and with what unintended consequences, is significant in assessing the final outcome. A thriving neighbourhood or town may be an indicator of success, but if it brings with it gentrification, which squeezes some people out of the area, then the outcome may be questionable to some. However, one partnership member reflected on what was being left behind, which was more about mindsets:

If Big Local works, I believe we will not just leave community centres, street festivals, tidy gardens and profitable shops, important though all of these are. Our legacy will be a place where people sense that we do things differently here.

Key indicators of success in this area include:

- A sense of pride and identity.
- A thriving place, socially and economically.
- A place where the community and others work together more effectively than before.

2.5. From outcomes to impact?

When asked where the above four outcomes lead, a participant at the 2024 Our Bigger Story residential workshop suggested that collectively the outcomes had led to communities having more power. This coincides with Local Trust's research 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, n.d.)

An additional way to consider success, then, is to review whether steps towards the achievement of the four Big Local outcomes, as outlined above, have in turn led to the increased agency, or power, at the local level.

There is some evidence to support this proposition across the 15 Our Bigger Story areas. Our analysis indicates that areas that have made the greatest progress in terms of the four Big Local outcomes were, as they come towards the end of the programme, also more able to demonstrate agency. In one Big Local area, a Big Local worker noted in 2019 that: "*This programme is about relationships at a local level and agency at a local level*". In this area the partnership has undoubtedly achieved a lot of what it set out to do in its Big Local plans and has demonstrated considerable progress against the four outcomes. By 2024, the realisation of agency was suggested by the following report from a respondent from the same area:

People have realised that they can affect change, so if they have learnt how to do consultations, create a vision ... they have increased their skills and confidence and realised we can really do this.

In another area, ambitious strategic planning and enduring negotiations with the local authority and other external funders, alongside dogged determination to achieve a community vision, have led to a changed physical infrastructure at neighbourhood level, as well as a guaranteed future income stream that will benefit the community for many years to come.

There are other examples of success in terms of building power and agency, but they are perhaps less visible, rather ad hoc, less easy to articulate and possibly less likely to endure. Indeed, whilst some success can be identified in all areas, some have made far less progress against the four outcomes, and relatively little seems to have shifted in terms of power and agency. Fourteen years in, the Big Local journey has clearly been smoother for some than for others. Understanding why this variation exists is important. Such analysis can, for example, help us to understand what enables or constrains success in resident-led change. Section three focusses on these variations.

Exploring variations in success across Big Local areas

Our assessment of what has made for greater success in terms of progress towards the four Big Local outcomes and wider impact in terms of increased agency is based on a longitudinal, qualitative analysis of what people in the 15 Our Bigger Story case study areas said about their communities, what they had done through Big Local, and what they thought had changed as a result. It is also based on what we have seen as an evaluation team: following the areas since 2015 has provided unique insights into the dynamics of resident-led change and the complexities of 'success'.

As evidenced in section 2 above, however, it is apparent that some areas were able to make more of the opportunities available to them through the programme. Consequently, they illustrated greater progress towards the four outcomes, and towards having greater agency. Accounting for this variation through addressing the question of **why** some areas were more able than others to achieve these four outcomes and build agency is the focus of this section. Our analysis highlights **seven conditions** that were particularly important in shaping the prospects for success:

- Basic demographic and socio-economic characteristics.
- Levels of community activity.
- Leadership.
- External relationships.
- Collective identity.
- Access to community buildings.
- And individual skills and capabilities.

Whilst these conditions were highly influential in terms of shaping the possibilities for success, we also identify four additional factors – **four ways of working** – that interacted with them to either enable or constrain the chances of success:

- Establishing robust governance structures.
- Acting strategically.
- Engaging with effective support, and
- Managing conflict.

This section works, in turn, through these seven conditions and four ways of working. Together they can be seen as the factors which have shaped the prospects for success in Big Local.

3.1. Conditions shaping success

Demographic and socio-economic characteristics

All the areas that have been part of Big Local were selected on the basis of previously having received less than average levels of funding through the national lottery. Two of the 15 Our Bigger Story areas have been classified as 'left behind' (see Glossary). Most had relatively high levels of deprivation although within this there was variation. Our analysis found no clear pattern as to how existing levels of deprivation affected an area's ability to make progress on the four outcomes. Whilst none of the most deprived of the OBS communities were amongst those that had moved furthest towards the four outcomes, equally none were within those that had made least progress. Similarly, areas with the lowest level of deprivation (relative to others within the sample of 15 Our Bigger Story areas) were found amongst those that had been the most and least successful in moving towards these outcomes. That is not to say that deprivation does not matter – it can have real implications for the resources communities have to hand – but it does suggest that it is not a straightforward relationship, and not a significant factor distinguishing areas which were more or less able to make progress on Big Local outcomes.

Similarly, across the 15 areas, there were no clear patterns in terms of whether they were classified as being rural, urban, or coastal; nor as being dominated by social housing, new housing, 1960s stock or any other type of housing.

Such characteristics are not static. COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis have taken their toll. Broader social, economic, and demographic shifts play out in different ways in each of the areas. Respondents from some areas felt there had been change in terms of levels of deprivation in their areas across the 10-15 years they had been involved in the programme. Whilst conditions have improved for some, for others they have worsened. Some had seen new housing developments. Some have experienced gentrification processes and shifts in the demographic composition of the local community. Some of that change may be attributable to the Big Local programme – as areas have become better places to live, for example, new people have moved into them. Much, however, is part of the wider local context with considerable implications for the ability of residents to make a success of Big Local.

Again, whilst there was no clear pattern in terms of how these basic area characteristics influence success in terms of achieving the four outcomes, it was observed that the resources that each area had at the start of the programme, and those that they acquired along the way were influential. Analysing the evidence gathered from across the 15 Our Bigger Story areas over the nine years of the evaluation illustrate the importance of having, or more often growing, these wider resources to the success of the programme.

Levels of community activity

Levels of community activity, demonstrated through a combination of the number of active groups, organisations and individual volunteers within an area were highlighted as important to the success of Big Local. It is notable that those areas that were deemed to be most successful in terms of progress towards the four Big Local outcomes all now have high levels of community activity. Equally, those areas that were least able to make progress towards the four outcomes tended to have much lower levels of community activity.

Three things are, however, important to note. First, there were exceptions to this pattern. One area, for example, stood out in terms of having high levels of community activity (in the form of multiple local groups and clubs) at both the start and towards

the end of the programme, but – by their own admission – made limited progress towards achieving aspects of the four outcomes. High levels of community activity alone did not guarantee that areas would be successful in terms of achieving the four Big Local outcomes. Second, it was not the case that all those areas that had high levels of community activity (and were successful) had this from the beginning: for some, community activity was something that had been nurtured along the way, through engagement with the Big Local programme. In both scenarios, other factors were clearly at play. Third, and relatedly, it was apparent that it is not just the amount of community activity that matters. An area can have lots of active groups, but if these are not connected, if they are overly controlled by outside interests, or if they are not sustained over time, then they are less likely to be a productive resource for resident-led change.

Growing community activity through Big Local

Many Big Local areas have used small grants to stimulate and sustain community activity. The longitudinal nature of Our Bigger Story has meant that we have been able to follow some of the groups in receipt of money and to evidence the difference made over time. In one area, for example, the lasting effect of these grants is clear to see. The Big Local partnership awarded relatively small sums of money which kick-started new groups and developed existing ones. Many of the new groups are still going, such as a volunteer-led gardening project, an older people's weekly session run by its members which includes activities and a lunch, as well as occasional trips out, and a project which was started by a member of the Big Local partnership to offer family and food poverty support and is now a self-supporting charitable organisation. A fledgling young people's arts and drama group, which was based in a primary school, received funding and development support from Big Local, then raised more money and is now thriving in its own premises in a local shopping centre.

Community leadership

The importance of community leadership within Big Local has been explored elsewhere (Terry et al., 2023). Our analysis further highlights how the strength of community leadership was influential in an area's chances of success in achieving the four outcomes. It can be configured in different ways in terms of the dynamics in the relationships between residents, partnership members, workers and LTOs. Our analysis highlights elements of continuity and change in terms of the individuals involved in leadership positions – some continuity was good in terms of stability, but so too was some change in terms of facilitating wider engagement. But community leadership refers to more than just the presence or absence of individual community leaders. Leadership is about making things happen. It can take different forms from being held centrally to being more distributed across the community. While it was not always the case that the most successful areas had distributed leadership amongst a wider group of residents, they did each have a clear direction, devolved decision-making, and power was shared. Sometimes community leadership meant that residents dominated, whilst in others direction was more clearly provided by workers (sometimes themselves residents), Big Local reps, or LTOs. What was consistent, however, was a sense that people were working together for the good of the community, and to engender a sense of ownership amongst residents, making Big Local feel like 'their' programme. As respondents from two areas said:

It's about everyone pushing together for the good of the area and not competing... we have to think strategically. Because when the million is used up, what other money can we bring in to keep things going? (Project Worker)

When people are from estates, you're always done to, not done with, and I think this partnership really shows that it takes people along on the journey with them... and gives them that voice. (Partnership member)

In areas that struggled to make progress towards the four outcomes, leadership was either weaker or more concentrated amongst a smaller number of individuals. This did not seem to change significantly through the Big Local programme, and subsequently appears to have hindered its wider success.

Configuring community leadership through building connections and distributing decisions

Before Big Local began, an area comprising two distinct communities had some individual community leaders in one of the villages but fewer in the other. These leaders had some connections with each other and with individuals in voluntary and public sector agencies, but there was little evidence of connected or distributed leadership. The Big Local approach, however, recognised the need to build leadership and share decision-making amongst a wider range of residents. From the start, working groups were established to take forward the different themes in the Big Local plan. Each working group was tasked with meeting objectives that would help to make the Big Local vision real. As such, decision-making was devolved to the working groups who were accountable to the wider partnership in terms of financial support and evidencing outputs and outcomes. As time went on, several of these working groups became constituted bodies in their own right (while still under the umbrella of the Big Local partnership), so that they could apply for additional or match funding from other sources. This way of working has left a legacy across both communities of skilled individuals and community groups committed to pursuing the particular interests of their members, as well as many engaged resident volunteers. The partnership chair reflected: *"I think one of the key points of our success is there has been a joining together of so many talents, all these have come together and these talents have been shared"*.

Relationships with others

The nature and quality of relationships that areas, particularly Big Local partnerships, had with other, often external bodies, including parish councils, local authorities, other public bodies, and larger voluntary sector organisations, has also proved to be important. Areas that were most successful in terms of achieving the four outcomes tended to have strong relationships with such 'external' organisations. However, as areas move towards the end of the programme, it was not always so.

Few areas started off with strong relationships with external agencies. A clear difference, however, emerged between those areas which had been able to build these relationships over time and those which had struggled to do so, and in turn this affected their ability to make progress on the four Big Local outcomes. Responses to COVID-19 proved a critical turning point in many areas, helping to build or cement fledgling relationships with key stakeholders (as evidenced within the parallel programme of research on community responses to COVID-19, reported in Ellis Paine et al., 2022).

Some of the most successful areas, in terms of their achievement of the four Big Local outcomes, identified such relationship building as key to their own understanding of success. They pointed to the change in the quality of the relationships through which residents were being listened to in a way that had not previously happened, reflecting a sense of respect for what the residents had achieved and what they could contribute

to future discussions and decisions about their area: they now had a 'seat at the table' and a voice in decisions in a way which had previously felt impossible.

Areas that had struggled most in terms of progress towards the four outcomes all had weak relationships with formal and/or external decision making and funding bodies. Relationships with local councils were identified as particularly significant, and also particularly challenging in these cases. It is notable that the areas that struggled most all started, and look set to finish, their journey with Big Local with poor relationships with their local councils. In some of these areas the local authority was characterised as being 'inward looking' and seemingly not interested in developing relationships with residents through Big Local. In other areas there was a more direct tension or conflict between the Big Local partnership and (members of) the local authority.

Building relationships between residents and local authorities through Big Local

When asked what success looked like for a Big Local area, a resident and past partnership member described the difference their Big Local had made as: *"Immense. The biggest success is in getting people to work together. And engaging more broadly with the district council and other organisations"*. This particular Big Local had prioritised support for community groups to work better together and helped to create networks and host joint events. An improved relationship was also forged with the town council and Big Local's influence was exercised further as some key members became elected town councillors. As time progressed, working with resource holders and decision-makers became a significant priority – to seek planning permissions, to draw down additional funding and to ensure that the town was on the strategic map of local authorities. But it was the Big Local response to COVID-19 that fundamentally shifted relationships. The Big Local's knowledge about, and reach into, the community, combined with its ability to harness volunteers and support residents, led to official recognition as a partner during the pandemic. Subsequent closer strategic and working relationships with council members and officers led to district council economic investment and inclusion in council strategy documents, county council capital funding and mayoral / project support from the town council. The Big Local partnership was named several times over as a key place maker in the council's economic growth strategy. In 2023, a Big Local worker reflected that "[it has] *taken us this long to get to the table and will continue beyond 2023*".

Collective identity

As noted in section 3.1 above, there was no clear pattern in terms of the physical or demographic characteristics of areas and the ability to meet the four Big Local outcomes. More significant, however, appears to be the sense of collective identity that residents had with the area that had been bounded together for and through the Big Local programme. Across the 15 Our Bigger Story areas, there were those that were single, geographically well-defined communities; those that were areas within a larger geographically defined community; and those that were a number of separate communities brought together for the purposes of the Big Local programme. The extent to which residents felt, or expressed, a sense of collective identity with the area varied, with implications for how they worked together and their ability to make progress towards the four outcomes.

Those areas that had achieved most in terms of the four outcomes expressed a strong sense of collective identity with the designated Big Local area. For some, this was evident at the outset of the programme. For others it was enhanced across the duration of the programme, often through concerted efforts to create a new identity specifically

for the Big Local area. Some Big Local partnerships, for example, successfully invested in creating a collective identity, often through Big Local events such as galas, carnivals and markets, and flagship projects such as parks and community hubs, that in turn helped to build a sense of belonging and pride in the area. Our analysis suggests all these factors are important for the ability of areas to make progress on the four outcomes.

Meanwhile, those areas that had struggled to achieve the outcomes tended to have a noticeably weaker sense of collective identity across the whole Big Local area. Either it was an area which was harder to delineate and had little meaning to residents, or it was a collection of separate communities each with their own strong sense of community identity but with either no commitment or desire to create a new Big Local area-wide identity, or considerable barriers experienced when trying to do so. Some areas that were effectively a collection of individual villages or estates had worked hard to ensure that Big Local funding and support was shared equally across each of the communities rather than to create a unified sense of identity, and this may have affected their ability to meet the four Big Local outcomes at an area-level. As a respondent from one area said:

I think part of the problem we've had here is we work across five estates and they've all got their own identity. [...] And what that means is the jam has been very thinly spread.

Some areas were marked more by the divisions which were evident within them than by any sense of collective identity across them. This made it harder to work together in ways which proved important for achieving change in terms of the Big Local outcomes.

Enhancing an area's collective identity

A Big Local partnership in a coastal town aimed to enhance community pride and a sense of belonging through bringing people together and through re-creating a historical physical identity for the town. Initial community consultation found that residents wanted the local carnival to be reinstated and it became an annual event (including a 'lockdown carnival' in 2020). It was described by one organiser as a catalyst for community engagement, with an estimated 1000 people contributing to the 2018 event. The carnival was described by a Big Local chair as uniting people and playing a big part in belonging. The partnership also aimed to generate increased community pride through improving the look of the town. Big Local commissioned a master-planning exercise which informed the reintroduction of the town's past colour palate and style of street furniture. Big Local paid for the colour match to be produced and for the casting of bollards for example, which the council could then replicate. A subsequent Facebook survey illustrated the popularity of the new look to the town. These improvements were matched by the employment of a community caretaker whose role was to reduce litter on the streets, graffiti from buildings and create sites for plants and flowers.

Community controlled spaces

Having access to, and indeed control over, physical spaces and community buildings has been an important feature of Big Local. Through such spaces residents gather together, events are organised, activities are delivered and meetings held. It is notable that the areas considered to be most successful in terms of achieving the four outcomes have had access to community spaces – generally buildings – which are, to some extent at least, under their control if not ownership, even though most of the 15

areas involved in Our Bigger Story lacked such spaces to begin with. Those areas that have struggled to make progress against the four outcomes were less likely to have access to or control over community buildings or other useable spaces. Whilst this pattern is evident, it is also clear from our analysis that having a building was no guarantee of success, and vice versa.

The establishment of community-controlled buildings has often been seen as an important symbol of success within the local community. Whilst this analysis points to the importance of such building to local understandings of success and indeed to the wider success of the programme, the challenges associated with creating and maintaining such spaces should also be noted. In some areas, the focus on establishing a community building has absorbed such a significant amount of time, energy, money and emotion that there has been little left for anything else. In some areas it has become apparent that securing control over a community space is merely a starting point, but one that is proving difficult to sustain, either due to questions of financial sustainability or because of challenging relationships between various parties involved.

Establishing community-controlled spaces

In some areas, community buildings have been owned or at least managed by Big Local, in others they have been managed by another organisation and developed through Big Local support.

In the first scenario, one Big Local initially rented shop units in the town and operated them as community hubs. The space was fairly limited but Big Local controlled everything that went inside the premises. In the absence of any other community-controlled centres in the area, the partnership had ambitions to create a much larger community space. A funding plan was put together and eventually a building was bought and refurbished, through a mix of grants and a mortgage. The building is owned by the Big Local legacy body and provides a space for people to come together and chat in the café and the garden, and a space from which people can develop their ideas for community projects and put them into action. Space is also rented out to other local organisations, thus providing some rental income.

An example of the second scenario is in a Big Local area with very little indoor public space. A small community centre was located on the edge of the area but had little or no relationship with Big Local and physically was not fit for purpose. Over time, however, an increasingly effective partnership was developed between Big Local and a relatively new staff and volunteer team at the community centre. Big Local money and the centre's own fundraising efforts created a more financially viable and much improved physical space. Big Local became a regular user of the building – for meetings and events – which contributed to more resident engagement and a more sustainable community space.

Individuals' skills and capabilities

So far, the conditions contributing to success in meeting outcomes consist mainly of area-level resources. However, it was also evident that the availability, or realisation, of individual skills and capabilities was important for the success of Big Local areas. Indeed, arguably it was the role and work of key individuals who were instrumental to the success of Big Local in individual areas. Prior to Big Local, some areas already had skilled, confident, capable individuals who were engaged in other community activities and were instrumental in getting the programme up and running. The success of the programme was sometimes attributed to one or two individuals, as seen when

one participant in a Big Local area observed of a key individual: *“without [his] enthusiasm driving [our] knowledge of people on the estate this would never have been as successful”*. In other areas such skills and capabilities were only realised as the programme developed, through the recruitment of skilled community workers or built directly through the support provided through Big Local and/or through the very process of being involved in resident-led change.

Across all areas it is possible to identify individuals whose skills and capabilities have been developed through Big Local. But it is notable that the areas that have been most successful in terms of achieving the four Big Local outcomes tended to have a network of skilled individuals actively involved in the community already or that such a network was realised through the programme. Some Big Local areas have specifically given individuals the opportunity to develop personally and professionally, and this has been counted as one of the area’s own self-defined success criteria. Sometimes this is because the key individuals involved (community workers, or resident partnership members) are committed to always working in a developmental way; sometimes this has been through opportunities for resident volunteers to progress towards paid worker roles.

Areas that were least successful tended to lack a collective vision, or have fewer appropriate skilled or capable individuals involved, or have been where those individuals have struggled to work together to meet the collective outcomes. It is important to note that challenges in working together does not always relate to clashes of personality or conflicts over the direction and approach of Big Local. In a handful of the Our Bigger Story areas, serious health issues amongst partnership members disrupted the continuity and consistency of decision-making. Whilst there were key skilled individuals to begin with, they were not always able to stay involved throughout the duration of the programme. In addition, the long-term nature of Big Local inevitably meant that some significant activists, including chairs of Big Local partnerships, passed away during the programme.

Realising individuals' capabilities

In one Big Local area, a key success story centred on the skills and confidence built as a result of individuals' involvement in the partnership and the projects it supported. Many local volunteers began as users of services like the local foodbank, advice services and coffee mornings, set up and/or supported by the partnership, and were then empowered to get further involved. This also had knock on effects in other areas of their lives, for instance by helping with mental health and finding work. The Big Local partnership supported a community garden project, through which several volunteers developed skills, confidence and got more involved in other local projects. Its founder described how, when he first moved to the area, he could see there were problems but did not feel empowered to do anything about them. After receiving support from the Big Local partnership, he joined it, then became its Chair, and later was elected as a local councillor and finally Mayor of the area. The partnership also funded a Community Gardener, an existing volunteer, who worked across the growing collection of diverse green spaces, including high street planters and new gardens created in areas of derelict land. She also became a key active resident in the Big Local area, volunteering at existing projects and running evening and weekend activities for young people. Finally, the area's Big Local worker spotted a local resident volunteer in a community centre with a passion for creative arts and recognised that she had the right skills for community development work. The partnership employed her and she was able to develop local creative arts work through exhibitions, workshops, performance and more. As the original Big Local worker said: *"I don't think without having the opportunity with Big Local, she would be as confident as she is now. It's like a little seed has been planted and we've watched her grow. She's truly amazing."*

3.2. Ways of working that enable and constrain success

The seven conditions discussed above have all worked together in complex ways. No one set condition alone could account for the success or otherwise of a Big Local area, and the presence or absence of one element may be offset by another. The relative starting positions of the different areas was clearly influential. The contexts within which they were operating and the extent to which different resources could be brought to bear from the very beginning of the programme have all mattered. Having more of any one of these sets of resources to begin with was not always a clear predictor of success. Even when taken together, then, the seven conditions discussed so far could not account for all the variation in the success of Big Local areas in meeting outcomes.

These conditions can be considered as affecting the resources that Big Local areas either already had or built through the programme, and together shaped the possibilities of success. But it was also apparent that what areas did with those resources – the ways in which they approached and delivered Big Local – was also crucial for success. Our analysis points towards four ways of working that were particularly important in either constraining or enabling success: they established appropriate governance structures; acted strategically; engaged with effective support and they managed conflict.

Establishing appropriate governance structures

One of the few requirements associated with the Big Local programme was that each area established a partnership as the key governance structure for programme delivery. Considerable differences emerged, however, in terms of the extent to which partnership membership was refreshed and sustained, and in the wider governance

structures that were developed. The establishment of robust governance structures which facilitated collective decision-making, encouraged wider forms of resident engagement across the area, and which effectively devolved power, was identified through our analysis as a key enabler of success. One area, for example, had developed a series of working groups, each of which had been devolved decision-making responsibility for their area, and each of which was effective at facilitating wider engagement across the community. This governance structure, realised through the working groups connecting to the partnership, was seen as being central to success. Where robust governance structures were not established, power was more likely to be concentrated in the hands of a few key individuals, wider engagement was harder to build, and conflicts were more likely to escalate, disrupting progress towards the four outcomes, almost regardless of the presence or absence of the seven sets of resources identified above.

Acting strategically

Another programme requirement was that all Big Local areas had to develop a plan, which set out what they hoped to achieve for their area. Areas then reported against this plan annually, with periodic opportunities to refresh it. Again, however, there were considerable differences across the areas in terms of how they approached this requirement and more generally how strategic they were in their approach. Acting strategically included working collectively to research, develop and then be guided by a clear vision for the area, building and drawing upon research and evidence on local needs, identifying actions that would meet those needs and fit within the vision, whilst also being flexible and responsive to – relevant – opportunities as they arose. As one respondent reflected: *“it’s about everyone pushing together for the good of the area and not competing ... we have to think strategically. Because when the million is used up what other money can we bring in to keep things going?”* Areas that were less successful in terms of the four Big Local outcomes were less likely to be acting strategically: they did not have a shared, guiding vision and were not planning and evaluating their actions as they went. As one said: *“It’s a struggle to get a shared vision”*.

Engaging with effective support

Throughout the Big Local programme all areas had access to support, alongside funding, in a variety of forms, including through LTOs, Big Local reps, national partner organisations, and locally sourced and funded assistance. However, some areas made more of this opportunity than others, and in some cases the support was more effective than in others (see Wilson et al., 2023). Our analysis for this report has highlighted how support could either enable or constrain success, through its interaction with the resources described in sections 3.1 to 3.7. Effective support helped areas make the most of the resources and opportunities that were available to them, and this became self-reinforcing. As one resident from a particularly successful area reflected: *“we have gone out of the way to attend Local Trust events up and down the country ... we’ve engaged ourselves in the whole Big Local project nationally. And that peer support that we’ve had externally has been very helpful”*. Less engagement with effective support, simply because Big Local areas didn’t know what they needed or because the help they did access proved less effective, could get in the way of progress towards outcomes, even when other conditions were favourable.

Managing conflict

Long-term, resident-led change is not easy, and all areas experienced tensions and conflicts at one point or another, whether between partnership members, with wider residents, with Big Local reps and LTOs, or with external bodies. How areas responded to such conflict, however, could have a significant influence on the chances of success.

Some areas were able to manage conflicts. They worked with or around any tensions that existed within the area in a way which then became less disruptive of successful progress towards achieving the four Big Local outcomes. But whilst some areas were able to move beyond, and perhaps even became stronger as a result of such conflicts, for others they proved more difficult to resolve. Entrenched conflicts made it more difficult to make progress on the four outcomes, and to be successful in these terms, sometimes regardless of the wider resources available.

4

Conclusions: learning about success

Measuring the 'success' of Big Local is not straightforward: indeed, it is highly contentious, and some would argue unhelpful to even try. The initiators of the programme at the Big Lottery Fund (now NLCF) deliberately proposed very broad ranging outcomes. In addition, commitment to the concept of resident-led change meant that in practice there were 150 community visions and community plans with unique milestones and a variety of approaches. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that success means different things to different people involved in the programme; that our conclusions about success might vary depending on whether it is viewed at programme, area, or individual level; and whether success is judged throughout the programme, at any one point in time, or sometime in the future. And this is arguably exactly as it should be. By design the programme has problematised notions of success and success measures when imposed on communities from the top-down.

At the same time as problematising the notion of success within Big Local, however, we found a broad agreement that much has been achieved through the programme, guided by the original four Big Local outcomes:

1. Communities will be better able to identify local needs and take action in response to them.
2. People will have increased skills and confidence, so that they continue to identify and respond to needs in the future.
3. The community will make a difference to the needs it prioritises.
4. The area will be an even better place to live.

Focusing on these four outcomes, our analysis has demonstrated three things. First, it showed that all areas had made progress towards each of the Big Local outcomes. Second, that those areas that were able to evidence making the clearest progress against the outcomes were also those which had increased agency, suggesting that these outcomes are important steps along the way to greater power and agency for communities as the ultimate impact of Big Local in some areas. Third, as this suggests, 'success', at least in these terms, was variable over time and between areas. Some areas had been able to make and sustain greater progress against the outcomes and were more able to realise agency than others. Understanding how and why this variation exists became the focus of the analysis presented in this report, with the aim of providing insights into what might help or hinder communities in their efforts to create resident-led change.

The Our Bigger Story research also found that the different starting points that communities had at the beginning of the programme was influential, but not conclusively so. When we examined basic area characteristics, including levels of deprivation, location, key demographics and housing characteristics, we found no clear relationship between area characteristics and the likelihood of success in terms of areas' ability to achieve the four Big Local outcomes. Whilst these dimensions influenced each area's engagement with the programme, it was clear that other factors were in play.

Our analysis highlights the importance of seven conditions which were particularly important in shaping the prospects of success:

- Basic area characteristics.
- Levels of community activity.
- Leadership.
- External relationships.
- Collective identity.
- Access to community buildings.
- Individual skills and capabilities.

However, whilst these seven conditions were highly influential in terms of shaping the possibilities of success, we also identified four significant ways of working – that interacted with them either to enable or constrain the chances of success:

- Establishing robust governance structures.
- Acting strategically.
- Engaging with effective support, and
- Managing conflict.

No one factor alone could explain why some areas were more successful than others in terms of progress against the four Big Local outcomes. It is the combination of factors interacting in complex ways which is influential. Even when partnerships seemed to have everything stacked in their favour – high levels of community activity, skilled individuals, and access to community buildings, for example – progress towards the four outcomes could be disrupted by not establishing robust governance structures, not acting strategically or ongoing conflicts. Similarly, areas that might be lacking in some of the influential resources, might build them through acting strategically after engaging with effective support, and those growing resources may then support their progress towards the four Big Local outcomes. This point also illustrates the cumulative and iterative nature of many of these different factors – they can be seen as both resources that areas needed and also as early outcomes of their engagement with the programme.

Whilst no one factor alone could account for variations in success, it is notable that in each successful area there were clearly identifiable individuals that other participants would point to as being particularly instrumental in the success of the programme locally. These individuals included residents (usually partnership members) and Big Local workers. They were the people who drove Big Local, but who also took a wider group of residents with them on the journey. Even in areas that may have been challenged by the four Big Local outcomes, the success that they did have was often attributed to key individuals who had made a considerable difference to the area through their engagement with Big Local.

Our analysis therefore points to the interactive and cumulative nature of many different factors, with the engagement of skilled, capable individuals highlighted as being particularly important. They helped ensure that partnerships were acting strategically, building robust governance structures, managing conflict and engaging in effective support. These people helped to ensure that the community vision was collectively held and developed pathways to participation and community leadership, and indeed agency. In this way, residents were able to grow community activity, build relationships, configure leadership, create community-controlled spaces, and generate a sense of collective identity.

There is little doubt about the benefits of a long-term programme. Not only has it given communities the space to build, and in some cases rebuild, structures and plans and action, but it has changed mindsets in communities. Residents have demonstrated an understanding of what investment over the long-term can look like. Many of the OBS areas have strategically used the timeframe and the funding to invest in people, lever in substantial additional resources and create community governance for the future. This assertion will be picked up and further tested in the final year of the OBS longitudinal study (2024-25) when we focus on what has been learnt about the value of long-term funding and support.

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