

Learning practices, skills and capabilities for resident-led change in Big Local Areas

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

May 2025

OUR BIGGER STORY: WHAT HAS CHANGED?



Learning practices, skills and capabilities for resident-led change in Big Local Areas

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

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Big Local is a resident-led funding programme providing people in 150 areas in England with £1.15m each to spend across 10-15 years to create lasting change in their neighbourhoods. The programme is run by place-based funder Local Trust, 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. Previous reports, along with photos and films to illustrate the journeys of Big Local partnerships, are available on a dedicated website, [Our Bigger Story](#).

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Particular thanks to the 15 Big Local study areas:

- Barrowcliff
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- Westfield Estate
- Whitley Bay

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Glossary of key Big Local programme terms

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 responsible for a portfolio of areas at a sub/regional level. They provide general guidance, advice and challenge to Big Local areas.
Big Local area advisors	A pool of people contracted to Local Trust to provide specialist skills, guidance, challenge and support to areas.
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 (see above).
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.
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 hyperlocal areas in England. Each area was given access to £1.15m and a programme of support over a ten to 15-year period. Throughout the programme period a multi-media, longitudinal evaluation, Our Bigger Story (OBS), has been following 15 of the Big Local areas, undertaking qualitative research and sharing findings as we went along. This report builds on our previous reports on **legacies** (Wilson et al., 2022a), Big Local **futures** (Wilson et al., 2022b), national **support** provision (Wilson et al., 2023), and particularly our 2024 report on **understanding success** in Big Local (Wilson et al., 2024). Our research for this report was guided by the following question:

What are the skills and capabilities which underpin the practice of resident-led community change, and how has the Big Local programme enabled their development?

We examine the practice and associated skills and capabilities for pursuing resident-led change well. Our focus is on the learning of practices, skills and capabilities by residents within Big Local areas. This was particularly apparent amongst partnership members, but we also reflect on when, why and how wider members of the community brought and developed these skills and capabilities. We consider how the development of the practices, skills and capabilities for resident-led change was supported through the Big Local programme.

Skills and capabilities for resident-led change

There is a long-standing body of literature on the values, principles, knowledge, skills, competencies, and processes of community development. In this report, we do not seek to professionalise the voluntary activity of residents but to acknowledge the skills that residents brought to, and developed through, the Big Local programme.

We identified eight practices and associated sets of skills and capabilities in the Our Bigger Story areas, as follows:

1. **Listening to the whole community and identifying needs:** One key area of learning for those involved in Big Local has been how to listen to the whole community, in all its diversity, and in doing so identify needs which can then become the focus for subsequent actions. It was evident that residents had learnt a lot *about* and *from* the process of consulting, both in terms of knowledge about their communities and the skills and capabilities required to assess needs.
2. **Creating a vision and being strategic:** Once needs were understood within a community, actions against those needs were prioritised, a vision for change articulated, and a plan developed. These were new areas of learning for many residents. Partnership members reflected that that they had become more systematic in their approach as time went on.
3. **Residents working together and making collective decisions:** Our Bigger Story participants have reflected on the different skills, knowledge and confidence that

partnership members needed, and gained from, working together to create, delivery and manage their plans. One Big Local chair described the learning curve of involving residents who had never been on a committee before becoming more confident and developing into a cohesive decision-making body. Approaches to building these skills for working together varied from paying for training to drawing on the support and challenge of their Big Local rep, Locally Trusted Organisation (LTO) and/or worker.

4. **Engaging and communicating with the wider community:** Some partnerships have been self-critical around their ability to get the message out about Big Local, and to broaden community engagement. For some, this has been a steep learning curve. Partnership members talk about residents not knowing what Big Local is or what it offers after ten years or more. All the OBS Big Local partnerships have tried to communicate what the programme is about, but our learning is that the broader community takes notice when they are involved in something they feel is meaningful to their lives.
5. **Delivering projects, activities and events:** Approaches to the delivery of Big Local plans took different forms in the 15 OBS areas. Many partnership members had no previous experience of developing and delivering activities and projects, which ranged from community gatherings to large scale capital projects. Over time, partnerships felt they learnt how to deliver projects, including how to work with external providers.
6. **Building effective relationships and working collaboratively with others:** Partnership members needed to be skilful in building effective relationships and working collaboratively with a range of local agencies and organisations. To influence change at the hyper-local level, residents needed to understand the different structures and bodies working in their area and how they interrelated. They needed to understand where power lay – where decisions were made and who by, who held resources, and how they could be accessed. They became more knowledgeable about the capacity and political will of partners, such as local authorities.
7. **Managing and learning from conflict:** Residents learned how to manage conflict, both within communities and with external organisations. Being able to work through tensions and develop the skills and confidence to manage, resolve and learn from conflict was critical. In the main, the partnership chair and/or Big Local workers played significant roles in reducing conflict.
8. **Reflecting on what has and hasn't worked and accessing support:** Partnership members talked a lot about the long programme timeframe as enabling them to try things out and reflect on what works and what doesn't. Making space for reflection is then recognised as important but it is also the case that reflection can be uncomfortable for some – it can require confidence to speak up and to reveal perceptions that others might disagree with. Learning when and how to access support was an important part of this.

Who held and learnt these practices, skills and capabilities, and how they were learnt, used and passed on was crucial. There were variations between and within each area, **and the availability of skills and capabilities ebbed and flowed over time in response to changing individual, area, programme and national level contexts.** These learning processes occurred through four key mechanisms:

1. **Prior learning:** Some residents brought prior learning about resident-led change to Big Local, having had previous experience of taking part in community development initiatives, or being active in local groups and organisations.
2. **Practice-based learning:** the skills and capabilities for resident-led change were also learnt through doing: much learning was found to be practice-based.
3. **Peer-learning:** learning from peers was important, whether this was from other residents within a Big Local partnership or from partnership members in other Big Local areas.
4. **Professional learning opportunities:** learning also came from community development professionals, which may have been Big Local workers, LTOs, through Big Local reps,

area advisors, or national support providers. Big Local workers often modelled facilitation, negotiation and organising skills and created an environment where residents had opportunities to try things out, step up and play a leading role.

Programme conditions

All funding programmes have conditions associated with them. Underpinning the Big Local programme is a hypothesis about resident led change: *‘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.). This suggests that the two key programme conditions understood to build agency and so create positive change in communities, through the mechanism of resident-leadership, are (long-term) funding and support. Here we consider the ways in which these programme conditions enabled the development of the practices, skills and capabilities for resident-led change as outlined above.

Funding

Three key aspects associated with the awarding of funding to each of the Big Local areas were highlighted as being particularly significant for learning the practices, skills and capabilities for resident-led change:

- **That residents control the use of the money:** A key condition of the Big Local programme was that the funding was controlled by residents – it is a resident-led programme. Whilst a Locally Trusted Organisation (LTO) is chosen in each area to manage the money, it was designed to be the residents – through the partnership – who made decisions about how the money was spent. Whilst this has not always been easy, the requirement on residents to form a partnership, assess needs, prioritise, and create a plan to be able to make decisions as to how the money was spent, helped to ensure that the associated skills and capabilities were developed, it also opened doors to them which would likely otherwise have been closed if others had held the purse strings – they learned through spending (SCLA, 2024).
- **That it is non-prescriptive:** The lack of prescription associated with Big Local was seen as a key point of distinction from other programmes, and important in terms of enabling the development of skills and capabilities. There was relatively little prescription as to *how* the money should be spent or *to what ends*. This enabled partnerships to experiment, to come up with their own visions for what change they wanted to see in their areas, and to deliver their plans accordingly, enabling the development of associated practices, skills and capabilities for resident-led change.
- **That it is long-term:** The funding was available for a period of up to 15 years, with the majority of areas using the money over a 10–12-year period. Our analysis suggests that the long-term nature of the funding was fundamental to the learning of the skills and capabilities associated with the practices of resident-led change. Residents were given time to develop relationships within the partnership as well as with others who could help deliver their plans; they were able to try things out, learn what worked and what didn’t; and work through issues when they arose confident in the knowledge that they could take their time without the threat of funding coming to an end/being withdrawn. For partnership members, however, maintaining the level of commitment and energy demanded by the programme over this time period was challenging. Life did not standstill whilst residents were involved in the programme. This has implications for the accumulation of skills and capabilities within and beyond partnerships.

Support

There has been considerable variation between areas, and over time, in terms of the support that has been needed, how they have engaged with support, and the difference that support

has made (see Wilson et al., 2023). Two aspects of support were found to matter most to the development of skills and capabilities for resident-led change:

1. **Consistent support based on relationships:** It is not just the consistency of the support offer in general over the long term that was important but also continuity within individual support providers, particularly reps and LTOs. Knowing when to intervene – when additional support might be required by areas even if not asked for – has been an area of learning for Local Trust and other support providers involved in Big Local.
2. **Multi-faceted support:** As Wilson et al. (2023) show, support has included the provision of technical expertise, skills development, guidance and information sharing, relationship building, peer support and adding capacity. The mix of actors involved in supporting residents – and how this varies – is one of the factors that can help to explain why some areas appear to have learnt more about the practices, skills and capabilities for resident-led change, and so have been able to make greater progress towards the programme outcomes, than others. In many areas the transfer of such skills from workers to residents has been crucial. Local Trust's early reliance on Big Local reps, initially contracted by an external partner organisation, and subsequent employment of area coordinators and contracting of area advisors to provide ongoing or specialist support as needed, can be seen as a recognition of the importance of this role and the community development expertise that it represents. Bringing the roles in house built internal expertise, knowledge, relationships and control.

Conclusions

Four broad conclusions can be drawn from the research:

1. **At least eight sets of practices, skills and capabilities have been built over the course of Big Local.** In many ways they reflect previous understandings of good community development practice, which can and should also be considered outcomes in and of their own right.
2. We found evidence that **what often mattered most was the development of a shared belief in what could be achieved and an understanding of how.** This sense of confidence was for many something that needed to be developed. It is handed on and over not simply through training or development, but through practice and engagement.
3. **The design of the Big Local programme played a key role in enabling the skills and capabilities required for resident led change.** At the heart of Big Local has been the **time** to build partnerships and understand what was needed, to engage people in the process, to learn from what has worked and what has not, to work through challenges and conflicts, with the associated money and support to do so.
4. The **skills and capabilities for resident-led change were not evenly distributed or built through the programme** – there are variations within and across areas and also over time. These were held or built for some residents, partnership members, workers and other organisations more than others.

Overall, the findings reveal that **the learning of new skills and capabilities, whether formal or informal, hard or soft, brings a 'learned optimism' about resident-led community change.** It expands ideas of both what is imaginable and possible. This is the exact opposite of the common experience of 'learned helplessness' or the giving up of trying to change an existing set of adverse circumstances. Learned optimism in Big Local's approach to resident-led community change seems to be the element which brings together the way in which skills and capabilities, and importantly, confidence, are developed. This was found to be the result of an interplay between Big Local areas and the financial and non-judgemental responsive support provided over a long period of time. Whilst powerful, however, this is not enough to overcome the structural challenges which many individuals and communities continue to face.

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 ten to 15-year period. The programme started in 2011 and is 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.

As stated within a recent Local Trust report: “From the outset, Big Local was designed to be radically different from other funding programmes. In contrast 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 time, at communities’ own pace, and according to their own plans and priorities” (Local Trust, 2024: p. 1).

Since 2015, a multi-media, longitudinal evaluation, Our Bigger Story (OBS), has been following 15 of the Big Local areas, undertaking qualitative research and sharing findings as we go. This report focuses on the practices, skills and capabilities for resident-led change. It builds on our previous reports on **legacies** (Wilson et al., 2022a), Big Local **futures** (Wilson et al., 2022b), national **support** provision (Wilson et al., 2023), and particularly our 2024 report on **understanding success** in Big Local (Wilson et al., 2024). As part of an ongoing, broader question about what has been learnt through OBS about the value of 15 years of funding and support for resident-led change, the 2024 *Understanding Success* report focused on the programme achievements and aimed to challenge some of the conventional understanding that success is measured in terms of outputs or the meeting of pre-determined target-based outcomes for public services, as happened with past regeneration efforts such as New Deal for Communities and the Single Regeneration Budget.

There are four high-level programme outcomes for Big Local:

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.

Importantly, however, within the framework of these outcomes, Big Local areas came up with their own priorities for action, largely based on input from residents.

Analysis from OBS in the first half of the programme (McCabe et al., 2017) found 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 a later report on legacies of Big Local for people and places (Wilson et al., 2022a), outcomes were understood to be much more nuanced and meaningful to residents, considering such things as building community together and supporting young people to lead future community-based activities. *Understanding Success* took this further to understand what success meant for residents in the Our Bigger Story areas, and how and why progress towards the four Big Local outcomes varied. All pointed to the importance of building the practices, skills and capabilities for resident-led change, but none examined them in detail. This report picks up where the other reports left off.

1.2. Understanding the value of community action

This report focuses on the *practices and associated skills and capabilities for pursuing resident-led change well within Big Local areas*. Practices evolve over time and come to have standards, criteria, norms and purposes by which they are pursued and judged, even if these are not always explicitly stated or agreed; they require judgment, practical wisdom, skill, capability, reflection and learning.

In exploring the practices, skills and capabilities for resident-led change we can draw on existing evidence of the practice of community development, which has a long history, a continuous thread of knowledge and debate, and has involved a reflective conversation amongst practitioners extending over time. It can act as an inheritance for new generations of practitioners. Equally there may be reinvention or the development of new approaches. Whether old or new, practices have intrinsic or tacit qualities which are difficult to codify. For instance, the care and craft required to build confidence and credibility of an active group of residents, including the social skill needed to engage with and gain the support of others, such as representatives of local statutory bodies.

Based on existing community development thinking and practice, we can outline what we think these capabilities are, being careful to distinguish resident-led practices from other forms of (professional) community work. Understanding these capabilities builds out from our *Understanding Success* report, which highlighted the significance of engaging skilled, capable individuals within communities in explaining variations in success across the 15 OBS areas. However, a focus on capabilities is equally a radically different approach to understanding human collective progress and thus a closer critical attention to and appreciation of what matters in the complex unfolding process of a programme like Big Local.

Our attention is on examining the practice and associated skills and capabilities for pursuing resident-led change well, focusing on residents within Big Local areas. We examine the development of skills and capabilities amongst partnership members, but we also reflect on when, why and how wider members of the community brought and developed these skills and capabilities. Whilst our focus is on residents, we consider how the development of the skills and capabilities for resident-led change were supported by others such as Big Local workers, LTOs, reps, support providers and Local Trust itself. In doing so, we also touch upon the learning that these professional experts gained and shared in terms of how to support resident-led change (something that is explored in more depth elsewhere, for example: Baker et al., 2024; Dobson et al., 2022; IVAR and Just Ideas, 2023; Wilson et al., 2023).

1.3. Our approach

Since it commenced in 2015, the OBS evaluation has focused on different issues and themes each year. In the final phase of the research (2023-2025), we have been looking back over the whole of the programme. To do this, we analysed existing data, collected through the evaluation since 2015, whilst also generating new evidence on how residents and Local Trust staff understand the necessary capabilities and skills required to deliver the programme.

For this part of the research, we undertook the following:

1. Existing material: we looked back at collected material from OBS case study areas (100s of interviews, discussions and workshops, and extensive film material); whilst also reviewing literature and existing Local Trust research, including four biennial partnership member surveys.
2. Interviews/workshops: with Big Local partnership members, residents, Big Local workers, LTOs and legacy bodies (new or existing organisations that are continuing a resident-led approach as the funding for Big Local comes to an end) in OBS case study areas.
3. Interviews/workshops: with Local Trust staff, undertaken through both Local Trust's staff away day and through follow-up interviews (8) with staff from across Local Trust to draw learning beyond the 15 OBS case study areas. This included drawing on insights from Local Trusts surveys of partnership members (2016, 2018, 2020, 2022, 2024) which have recorded people's experiences of leading Big Local in all Big Local areas.
4. Residential with OBS areas: further discussions with attendees where we explored the lessons from the 15 years of the programme.

Our research for this report was guided by the following question:

What are the skills and capabilities which underpin the practice of resident-led community change, and how has the Big Local programme enabled their development?

Our analysis of the skills and capabilities of resident-led community change was guided by a set of subsidiary questions, including:

- What does our existing data (in raw form, or as previously analysed and reported) tell us about the development of skills and capabilities for resident-led change?
- How have understandings evolved of what the required skills and capabilities for resident-led change are?
- What have been the most significant or consequential skills and capabilities for resident-led change?
- How has 15 years' funding and support enabled and/or hindered this process?

1.4. Structure of the Report

We address these questions in two main sections of this report. In section 2, we look closely at the skills and capabilities involved in the practices of resident-led community change. In section 3 we pan out to consider the wider programme conditions affecting the development of skills and capabilities. We conclude in section 4 with our reflections about the learning of new skills and capabilities and the significance of the programme in enabling residents to believe that they could influence change in their communities.

Linking practices, skills and capabilities

2.1. A framework for analysis

There is a long-standing body of literature on the values, principles, knowledge, skills, competencies, and processes of community development practice (Twelvetreets, 2024; Henderson, 2013; Crow, 2012). Existing literature, however, is often associated with community development as an occupation, or profession, rather than with resident-led community action. Publications include, for example, those associated with learning for community development practitioners, including the National Occupational Standards for community development (Standards Council Scotland, 2023) which are aimed at community development practitioners and encompass competencies around understanding and engaging with communities, group work and collective action, collaboration and working across sectors, supporting community learning, and governance and organisational development.

In this report, we do not seek to professionalise the voluntary activity of residents but to acknowledge the skills that residents brought to, and developed through, the Big Local programme. To help frame our analysis, we developed a framework informed by a review of existing literature and knowledge of experiences from OBS areas, which led us to eight practices and associated sets of skills and capabilities, which we examine in turn below:

1. Listening to the whole community and identifying needs.
2. Creating a vision and being strategic.
3. Residents working together and making collective decisions.
4. Engaging and communicating with the wider community.
5. Delivering projects, activities and events.
6. Building effective relationships and working collaboratively with others.
7. Managing and learning from conflict.
8. Reflecting on what has and hasn't worked and accessing support.

However, as the following sections show we find that these sets of skills and capabilities only take our understanding so far. We therefore begin with analysis based on these more formal qualities of skills and capabilities and then turn to developing a more nuanced understanding. This explores the complexity and more intrinsic nature of resident led change, considering the significance of attitudes and beliefs, how leadership is exercised often through softer and subtle skills, and how often this both requires and brings confidence. The following chapter then turns to how funding and support, can enable this whole range of skills and capabilities.

2.2. Core sets of practices, skills and capabilities found in OBS areas

In this section we explore residents' understanding of *what* they did and what they learnt through the practice of resident-led change, focusing on learning within OBS areas against the above framework. We then look at *who* held the skills and capabilities required for resident-led change, *how* they were developed and passed on.



2.2.1. Listening to the whole community and identifying needs

One key area of learning for those involved in Big Local has been how to listen to the whole community, in all its diversity, and in doing so identify needs which can then become the focus for subsequent actions. To begin the process of resident-led change, Big Local areas were guided through a 'getting started' phase which provided residents with support and small amounts of funding to start local conversations about making Big Local work. All areas were required to gather residents' views, identify local needs, create a community profile and agree a collective vision to help inform a Big Local plan for the area. It was expected that these steps might overlap and be repeated, in that understanding community needs would be an ongoing task. The steps set the tone for a repetitive cycle over the ten plus years of the programme. These and other programme conditions are discussed further in section 3.

Approaches to **consulting** the wider community varied between Big Local areas and evolved within areas over time. In some areas, **surveys were designed** and carried out, either through questionnaires which were posted through letterboxes or available at events; in others there was a structured consultation process with training for teams of residents and targeted places to meet people or conduct door-step conversations; some areas **organised and facilitated meetings and events**; and in one case an academic partner helped to make connections and engage with residents. It was evident that residents had learnt a lot *about* and *from* the process of **listening**, both in

terms of knowledge about their communities and the skills and capabilities required to **assess needs**. An evaluation of the early years of the programme concluded:

The level of detail and evidence in profiles and plans is one of the strongest tangible indicators that areas have (or have developed) the ability to identify local needs. (NCVO, 2015, p. 93).

This learning is also evidenced elsewhere. Most respondents to Local Trust's 2024 survey of Big Local partnership members, for example, said that their Big Local partnerships could identify what is needed to make their communities better places to live and could **prioritise** between different local needs. This was confirmed within OBS areas.

In addition to consultation, some communities did some observational **audits** and physical **community mapping**. They walked around the Big Local area and recorded, for example, the location of existing community venues, and the state of the street and green environment. Even within a small Big Local area, many residents discovered new and unfamiliar places, sometimes challenging their perceptions about the community in which they lived.

Analysing the information and **selecting priorities** based on the community's identified needs was significant in building confidence amongst partnership members – they got a real boost when they were praised for having understood local needs enough to have delivered something that the community had asked for, such as a play park or an improved neighbourhood environment. This knowledge of community needs also enabled partnerships to be responsive and opportunistic, as demonstrated in one area where a partnership that was faced with a short deadline for a funding application was able to use their enhanced consultation skills to add to information gathered earlier and put together a successful funding application.

Partnerships also learnt, however, that analysis of consultation findings and prioritising community needs could be problematic. For example, several partnerships that were keen to respond positively to resident wishes realised that what some people thought should happen was not necessarily of practical use to, or wanted by, those identified as needing them. As one partnership member commented:

They said what they think should be here rather than what they want here. Towards the end we started to ask more questions of people. We asked questions about policies, sustainability etc – we would not to have done that before – we learnt to do this.

2.2.2. Creating a vision and being strategic

Once needs were understood within a community, responsive actions were prioritised, a vision for change articulated, and a plan developed. **Visioning, prioritising and strategic planning** were completely new to many residents. Some OBS areas are still challenged when reviewing their vision and planning strategically but the majority have got better at it over time and have reflected on the skills that they developed and how they had helped in making things happen. An OBS area resident noted how Big Local had enabled the partnership to work within a framework which provided a clear sense of purpose, unlike some other community activity which lacked direction and became fragmented. Indeed, 90 per cent of respondents in the Local Trust 2024 survey of partnership members felt they had a better understanding of how their work contributed to priorities identified by the community.

The areas took different approaches to visioning and strategic planning. Some partnerships asked the Big Local rep/area advisor for facilitation support, in some

areas the Big Local workers took on this role and in others, partnership members led the process. All areas were encouraged to focus on the four Big Local programme **outcomes** and to **think creatively** about how they were going to achieve these through setting their own priorities for action.

Some partnership members have commented on how easy it was to be reactive to what was happening in their community at any point in time. However, when comparing Big Local plans over time it was evident that they had become more **focused** on a small range of evidence-based goals – a transition from the first plans which had been more wide-ranging. This learning about prioritising and planning strategically over the long-term was in part based on experience that bringing to fruition residents' ambitions was likely to take longer than anticipated, especially when they involved capital projects. Partnership members reflected that they had become more **systematic** in their approach as the partnership developed, with one recognising that, *“rather than a ‘scattergun’ approach, what they needed was a more targeted ‘sniper rifle’ approach”*. Another noted that they needed a big vision to prevent them from being *“carried away”* with certain people's *“pet projects”* and ideas.

The requirement to be visionary and to create community plans enabled partnerships to be **proactive** as well as **reactive**, and to **problem solve**. In one area, for example, the partnership realised a little way into the Big Local programme that they were having little influence over decision-making in public bodies. Instead, they **evaluated** that they needed *“to get off our backsides”* and be more proactive. They improved their relationships with public bodies and used their Big Local funding as a baseline to **attract further investment**. They were opportunistic in promoting an agenda favoured by statutory authorities and agencies, but which also generated funding for future community benefit.

In another area, the programme was credited with giving the partnership the experience of creating a vision to frame a plan and inform its delivery. The understanding and skills developed in this process have since been shared and adopted by other local organisations, including a local council. In some OBS areas, recognition of the need to plan strategically and how to do this was shared with broader community groups as part of a Big Local grant making process. In one, for example, community groups applying for funds were supported to create a **outcomes-based** business case around their application and partnership members worked through an **evaluation** process to assess the applications. Residents reflected that they had learnt a lot from this approach.

2.2.3. Residents working together and making collective decisions

All Big Local areas were required to form a partnership, with at least 51 per cent of its members being residents, and work together to pursue resident-led change. This was the first opportunity for many residents to come together to collectively make decisions to improve the area where they lived. Our Bigger Story participants have reflected on the different skills, knowledge and confidence that partnership members needed, and gained from, working together as they moved through plan creation to **delivery** and **programme management**. They talked about how they had learnt to **chair, facilitate, minute, and participate in meetings**:

I've learnt to write policies and procedures. I've learned to do grants. I've learned how meetings work. I've learned to write minutes. You name it, I've learned it. But I didn't know any of these things when I started ten years ago. I'd never written a report before. (Partnership member)

Many have also learnt about the softer skills they needed to listen and engage with others in thoughtful discussion to **collectively reach decisions** around increasingly

complex issues and actions. Some reflected on the leadership skills required to **listen**, to **negotiate**, to **mentor** and to **be patient** to ensure that other partnership members were onboard, learning about, “.... *taking people with you. Need to make strategic decisions but there are gaps in skills and understanding.*” (McCabe et al., 2017 p. 47). A Big Local worker described how one of the most exhilarating experiences of their career was watching a partnership of mostly inexperienced residents who had argued and talked over each other at the beginning, grow into a cohesive and innovative community development body, and how residents developed skills over time:

It's about who shapes the conversation, not just who takes the decisions. [...] For [a] majority of the partnership, it was the first time they had been in this position. These people are now really good scrutinisers, good at challenging, good at lateral thinking but at the beginning would have kept quiet. (Big Local Worker)

Learning about how things worked, helped to build the confidence to actively participate. Residents from one area reflected on how they used to just sit back, listen, and think everyone else knew what they were talking about, but after a few meetings developed the confidence to start **speaking up**. They said, “*we've got to know how the group operates and how we fit into it, ... eventually you start learning the process*”.

Working together could be a stormy process. One Big Local chair described the learning curve of involving residents who had never been on a committee before becoming more confident and developing into a cohesive decision-making body. In another area, a local councillor similarly reflected:

Big Local is a positive way for people to take ownership of where they live. ... people who hadn't worked together are now working together, people who couldn't sit in the same room are sitting together and people saying 'actually they are delivering.'

Building the **connections and relationships** with other partnership members, that in many places were non-existent at the beginning, were expressions of both collective action and collective power. Residents noted that others were trying to do the same thing, so they came together and worked jointly realising, as one person put it, “*there's just an abundance of power together*”.

Approaches to building these skills for working together varied. Some partnerships commissioned training in how to make meetings work well. Others were guided, and sometimes challenged, by their Big Local rep, LTO and/or worker. In some partnerships, decision-making was delegated through the creation of additional spaces for people to voice their ideas, such as informal get togethers or working groups where people could prioritise their involvement around their specific interests. A partnership member reflected:

... the people that were leading those, had a special interest in that particular activity. They weren't trying to do lots and lots of different things.... those people started to understand how to develop a programme of activities and what it means to put things in place.

2.2.4. Engaging and communicating with the wider community

Learning to communicate with and engage members of the wider community, beyond the partnership, was important for all Big Local areas. Many more people became involved in community activity beyond the partnership – in projects and community groups established and supported by the Big Local programme. However, partnerships have tended to be self-critical around their capability to get the message out about Big Local, and to broaden community engagement. Partnership members

talk about residents still not knowing what Big Local is or what it offers after 10 years or more. The time it takes for a community initiative to become embedded as part of the local infrastructure, has been underestimated, and more than one OBS area has reported that residents think some local activities are organised by the council, or indeed that Big Local is the council.

All the OBS Big Local partnerships have tried to **communicate** what the programme is about through leaflets, newsletters and social media, but our learning is that the broader community takes notice when they are involved in something they feel is meaningful to their lives and make **positive connections** with others. This is why one area has spoken about the significance of organising children's and youth activities – they make a noticeable difference to families' daily lives, and others have pointed to the significance of a physical community venue that people can walk into and feel a part of what is going on. A partnership member concluded:

Still struggle with getting messages across but getting better at it. Learnt that people need to feel part of something so set up a residents' network ... people ask questions e.g., 'who's doing this, who's paying for this, is it the council', ... the message is eventually getting out there, but it's taken years.

Equally however, partnership members have expressed frustration that they organise activities and very few people participate, or that residents attend events but don't take their participation any further – they don't step up and help make things happen. Not all residents have the same passion, motivation, time or confidence to volunteer. Whilst there is evidence around low community engagement in some of the areas, for the most part the reality is that OBS partnerships have **engaged** increasing numbers of residents in community activity over the course of the programme. As one partnership member commented:

I think one of the things that I've taken the greatest joy from is the way it has brought people out into their community who have contributed ... They have really committed to their community in a really meaningful way ... Some people say, "Oh it's always the same old people helping". That is not true. ... summer activities were supported by a raft of volunteers, some who just appeared on the day and said, "Oh you're a bit short-handed, I can give you a hand there," and that's really empowering I think because now we've got those people, they understand they can play a part in the community.

In *Understanding Success* (Wilson et al., 2024), we provided examples of how more people had become engaged in community activity, ranging from small grants programmes which kick-started new groups and developed existing ones through to a community festival which resulted from the contributions of 1,000 people. Such examples often **motivated** residents to take up positions of greater responsibility within their community as volunteers or group leaders, and in some cases move on to partnership membership or to paid Big Local roles. In a few instances, residents developed the confidence to stand for election to a local council. We also evidenced that skilled and capable individuals were key to creating a culture in which people **felt valued** through working together for the good of their community, engendering a sense of ownership amongst residents and making Big Local feel like 'their' programme (ibid, p. 25). This required **motivational** skills but also building resident's confidence and **nurturing** capabilities – it often required one to one **relationship building**.

2.2.5. Delivering and commissioning projects, activities and events

Approaches to the delivery of Big Local plans took different forms in the 15 OBS areas. Some commissioned other organisations to deliver projects on their behalf, particularly where a specialism was required such as youth services. Others delivered activities

themselves, for example, social activities for residents and community events but also large capital projects. Some were a combination of both. All approaches, however, required some skilled input. In the case of **commissioning** or contracting, partnership members were involved in **drawing up specifications, costing projects, recruitment procedures and evaluation processes**. Many partnership members had no previous experience of being in such a position. In some areas, there was an uneasy relationship with providers in the first few years of the programme; for example, one provider found itself constantly questioned by partnership members about its professional expertise. In another area, the partnership realised it had not been sufficiently clear about what was expected of a project and felt let down. Over time, partnerships felt they became better at **negotiating** and working with providers to achieve the desired outcomes.

Although partnership members held decision-making responsibilities, the real enjoyment was often in doing things. Many were more confident in their **organising** skills. Several OBS areas have run their own services, either entirely through volunteer effort or with help from paid workers. Such activities range from children's and youth work, job clubs and older people's exercise classes through to large scale community events. This approach has given volunteers opportunities to use skills they brought to the programme and develop new ones, including understanding roles and responsibilities, **group leadership**, and listening, communicating and **building relationships** with participants. People have also learnt about what will motivate others to participate, both as beneficiaries and as volunteers.

The most challenging area of delivery for partnerships has been capital project development, and in particular community buildings. This has tested the **logistical** and **financial planning** capabilities of Big Local partnerships as well as their **management, negotiation** and **partnership skills**. Several OBS respondents have discussed the challenge of working through complex and entirely unfamiliar tasks - that "*you don't know what you don't know*". Partnerships have brought in outside expertise to help, but this has not always been timely or enough support, and in some cases the development of buildings has led to a breakdown in trust between local partner organisations and a degree of community conflict. Partnerships have reflected on the need for hands-on/on-site project management and the confidence to pause and reflect if things are going awry.

2.2.6. Building effective relationships and working collaboratively with others

Residents needed to be skilful in **building effective relationships** and **working collaboratively** with a range of local agencies and organisations. We have previously reported that few areas started off with strong relationships, and that a contrast emerged between those areas which had been able to build these relationships over time and those which had struggled to do so (Wilson et al., 2024). Building relationships and working collaboratively with external stakeholders required a range of skills and capabilities which were often built through the programme.

Resident-led change implies community influence but as a concept it can be problematic in that it assumes that change-making can straightforwardly surmount institutional, cultural and structural barriers (Wilson et al., 2022b). Building effective relationships and working together to influence change at the hyper-local level, required residents to develop an **understanding of where power lay** and how power operates – the different structures and bodies working in their area and how they are interrelated, where decisions were made and who by, who held resources and how they could be accessed.

Significantly, a difference was made when Big Local partnerships **identified connections** with others based on mutually held objectives, invested time in

understanding and **mapping** where and how decisions were made, and developed **relationships** with resource holders which were solution-focused (Wilson et al., 2022b). In one area, for example, a resident noted that, “*the first thing that we did was to find out which councils we need to get to ... who were the drivers there, who would not take advantage of us, who might be the right person to do this*”. They went on to build relationships with people they thought would help them achieve their aims and were proactive in seizing opportunities to influence decisions as they arose.

Some other areas, however, took more time to reach this stage, concerned that agencies would interfere, question the community approach and try to assert their control over Big Local resources. Such concerns were not without substance, but the skill was in **initiating conversations** with those who would be supportive, and learning through the experience of trying:

We needed to learn how to behave in arenas such as meetings with the Council ... we just used to berate them you know and be quite rude to them, and that did no-one a service really. So, it was about learning to behave, how to be respectful, ... and how to compromise. (Big Local worker)

Negotiation was a key skill that was developed, though several partnerships also found themselves **lobbying** when negotiation was not enough or in a situation that one Big Local worker called “*minorly combative*”. Over time, collaborative working was forged through **presenting ideas and solutions** and persuading public agencies that they had a mutual interest in community benefit. For example, local authorities in many areas agreed to pick up the future maintenance of play parks and street furniture initially funded by Big Local partnerships. **Creative and lateral thinking** on the part of partnerships also helped – such as the town centre activities initiated by a Big Local partnership to benefit residents which also contributed to the council’s economic strategy, or the Big Local green energy initiatives which aimed to reduce living expenses for residents but were also in line with the council’s carbon reduction policies.

As knowledge and experience of the planning system and other local government and funder procedures grew, for example, partnership members became more attuned to the reality of a long timeframe. They also became more **knowledgeable** about the capacity and political will of partners, such as local authorities, who could change direction and sometimes block a project idea. One partnership member observed how more than once they had thought the council was on board with an idea only to find out later that whilst their key contacts may be supportive others in the authority were saying no.

Some Big Local partnerships had a head start as they had residents and/or workers who brought knowledge and previous experience of relevant public agencies and voluntary organisations, some having worked within them, some having lobbied from the outside. These people often shared insights with partnership members, signposted to appropriate departments, passed on contacts of councillors and so on.

2.2.7. Managing and learning from conflict

Resident-led decision-making is a complex process. Several partnerships in the OBS areas struggled at the start with forming a partnership where (often enthusiastic and passionate) residents could work effectively together. In two areas, for instance, there were issues with parish/town councils who felt resentful about wider resident control over Big Local resources. Of the 15 OBS study areas, at least five areas experienced conflict with an LTO and at least six areas faced issues with individuals on the partnership. Most of these struggles were overcome, or at least managed, through **mediation** and **conflict resolution** skills of partnership members, Big Local workers,

Big Local reps and Local Trust. However, as previously demonstrated, these are critical issues:

If anything differentiates Big Local from other place-based initiatives it is that disputes, when they do arise, are not between residents and some distant authority, but between close neighbours. This increases the intensity – a perception that there is somehow more at stake in resident-led action (McCabe et al., 2018).

Being able to work through tensions and develop the skills and **confidence** to manage, **resolve** and learn from conflict was critical. In the main, the partnership chair and/or Big Local workers played significant roles in reducing conflict, using their **negotiating** and mediating skills to **manage meetings**, and dealing with any emotional fall-out from disagreements within the partnership and between the partnership and wider stakeholders.

Some of the partnerships that successfully managed conflict reflected on how they learnt from their experience and often built stronger partnerships and relationships in the process. There were instances, however, where everyone shied away from the challenge of dealing with conflict, including Big Local workers. In these cases, conflict intensified, people experienced greater discomfort, and in a very small number of cases there was a need for external interventions to provide mediation or other forms of specialist support to help resolve/move on from conflict (see section 3).

The learning has been considerable. Local Trust's 2024 survey of partnership members across all 150 Big Local areas for example, found that 86 per cent of respondents felt they were better able to handle situations where people have different opinions, and most felt they were able to constructively deal with conflict and disagreements. In the OBS areas, there was evidence of residents developing the confidence to **navigate conflict** and **disagree well**. Partnership members at the 2025 OBS residential event reflected on their experiences of observing and being involved in conflict and cited **foresight**, **fairness** and **emotional intelligence** as key skills they had developed. The chair of one partnership reflected how, with support from the Big Local worker, they had learnt **patience** and **diplomacy** skills and instilled a culture of **respect** for others' opinions in turbulent early partnership meetings. Another partnership member commented that the partnership:

Brought quite a diverse bunch of people together who probably would never have met under any other circumstances ... We've all got different views ... everybody has maybe got a different agenda but we're all able to work things out and I think it's taught me quite a lot about other people and how to manage myself in an environment like this.

2.2.8. Reflecting on what has and hasn't worked and accessing support

Respondents have talked a lot about the long programme timeframe as enabling them to try things out and reflect on what works and what doesn't, and what they could do and what they needed help with. One partnership discussed how having 12 to 15 years meant they had three or four years to make some mistakes and maybe get things wrong, and that enabled them to work out relationships and how to work together and how to use their money, learning as they go through reflecting on their evolving practices. An LTO similarly commented that the partnership had looked back and some things had not quite worked so they picked themselves up and did something else which was a bit better than what went before. Perhaps where partnerships have not reflected quite so well is on the things that worked – people talk about learning from their perceived failures but less so about why something was a success. In

addition, partnership members have stressed how difficult it was to make the time for reflection when everyone was busy developing plans and projects:

To stop halfway and go back again, which is I think is right, but it's difficult when you're in that momentum and moving forward ...You're in that delivery mode. (Partnership member).

Making space for reflection is then recognised as important but it is also the case that reflection can be uncomfortable for some partnership members – it can require **confidence** to speak up and to **diplomatically assert** views that others might disagree with. It is worth noting that involvement in OBS has been significant in learning about the reflective practice within partnerships. The 15 partnerships were interviewed and engaged in facilitated reflective discussions on a regular basis as part of the research between 2015 and 2025. The research team observed that over time people's growing experience of involvement in Big Local led to an increase in confidence, and that this, alongside the relationships and trust that were built between the OBS research team and the 15 areas, and within the OBS network, generated **deeper reflection** around the ups and downs of their progress.

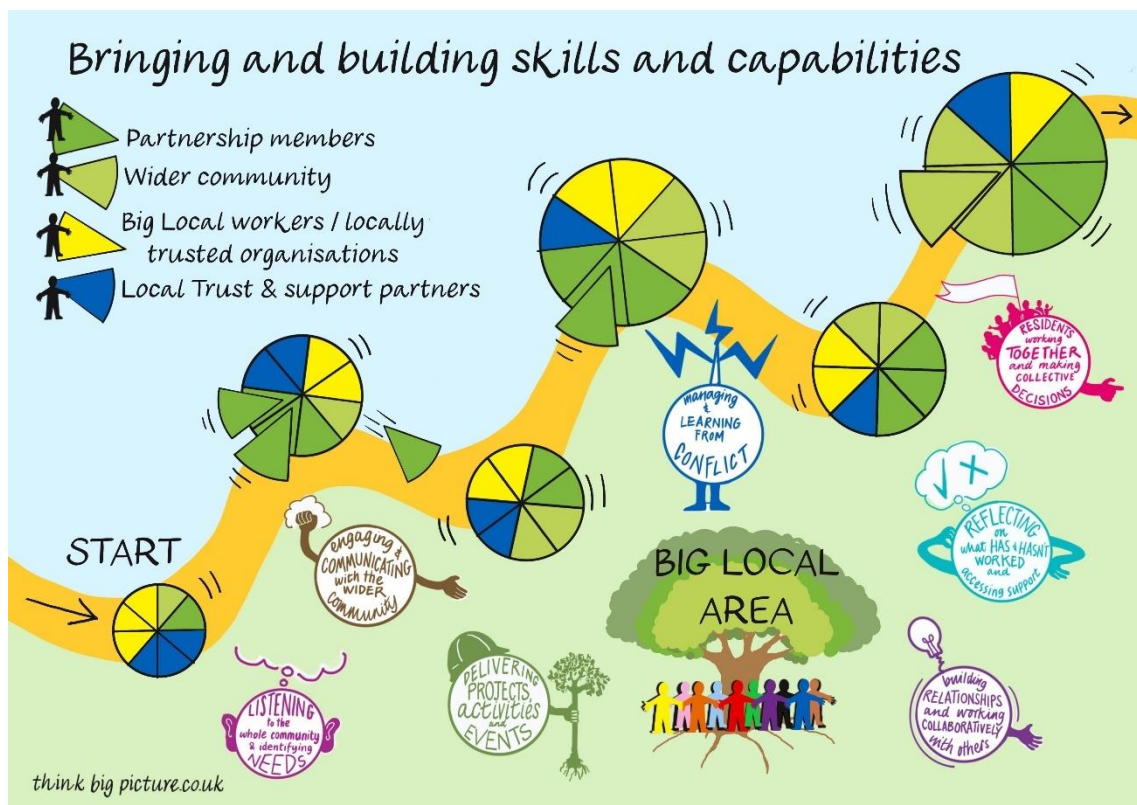
Some partnerships have been adept at identifying where they lack skills or knowledge and **finding support** to plug gaps. For example, in one OBS area the partnership has, over time, consciously changed the roles of their paid workers to bring in different expertise and support that they required as they moved through their Big Local journey. Others have accessed outside support when they realised they were struggling with project delivery or facing a conflict situation. However, for some the realisation came a bit late, as described by a Big Local worker:

It was at that point we were going forward with the building that we didn't realise we needed that support. We thought we was all okay. ... I think inevitably there's naivety. ...don't anticipate what's going to happen. ... You trust other people. ... in hindsight we could have done a lot more due diligence. We should have paused.

2.3. Who held the skills and capabilities for resident-led change and how were they passed on?

The above descriptions of the practices of resident-led change and the skills and capabilities observed and required in Big Local areas suggests a somewhat even and static picture, when in reality it is much more dynamic. Who held these capabilities varied within and between areas. Sometimes they were distributed across partnership members and other residents, sometimes just one or two people held the relevant skills, sometimes it was workers or LTOs, or Local Trust staff and contracted workers such as Big Local reps and area advisors. An OBS area, in its first Big Local plan, stated that:

An integral part of the Big Local approach is that it is a journey, with people developing skills, confidence and partnership networks over time which will help them deliver projects themselves, rather than be overly dependent on third parties. In addition, within each area the availability of skills and capabilities ebbed and flowed over time in response to changing individual, area, programme and national level contexts. Many areas experienced a cycle of residents bringing existing skills within them into Big Local, the programme progressing, residents learning new skills and becoming more confident, doing more, learning more, key people dropping out, things going wrong, confidence dropping, working through the issues, learning more through doing so, new people joining, and so on.



Contextual starting points of areas signified a difference in where skills were to be found. Some areas had a long history of community development and residents experienced in community group development and strategic thinking, whilst others had very little (Wilson et al., 2024). In one OBS area for example, there were partnership members with a long history of community activity who held strong community connections as well as relationships with external agencies. These members shared their knowledge with others and played significant roles in motivating greater community involvement, though they also looked to their Big Local rep to fill skills gaps as needed. In a few areas, partnership chairs brought professional skills in facilitation and consultation, as well as an understanding of policy and strategic knowledge. Also, in at least one area, past or even concurrent regeneration or community economic development programmes, meant they already had ideas in place and had external expertise to draw on. On the other hand, there was an OBS area where the early partnership was a collection of unconnected individuals with little previous experience of community activity, and they were very dependent on support from Local Trust. As one resident reflected, *“It was like growing up because obviously, you don’t know what you’re letting yourself in for”*. Most areas appointed community development workers, though some more successfully than others (in a couple of areas the workers were let go quite quickly). The most effective workers were those who understood the ethos of resident-led change, were able to model their skills through their practice and played a mentoring role with residents (see section 3).

The distribution of relevant skills and capabilities was not even within or between areas, raising questions of who gets involved in Big Local and how those who were less experienced were supported to build relevant skills and capabilities. As one Local Trust member of staff asked, *“if they haven’t got the skills, then where do they get them from?”* For the practices of resident-led change to be learnt and passed on, there needs to be someone for residents to learn from, and the mechanisms available for them to do so. The ways in which the skills and capabilities for resident-led change have been learnt and passed on also varied – through prior learning, practice-based learning, peer-learning, and professional learning opportunities.

2.3.1. Prior learning

Some residents brought prior learning about resident-led change to Big Local, having had previous experience of taking part in community development initiatives, for example, or being active in local groups and organisations. One partnership member reflected on how Big Local had reinvigorated their passion for community action and reinforced their view that, *“there are no limits to the difference we can make”*. Some were able to bring skills and capabilities from their working lives, which they applied to Big Local. Sometimes this was about realising the skills and capabilities that already existed within communities and putting them into action:

That’s the biggest thing that I have learnt, we are not just van drivers or brick layers you know. There are lots of hidden talents out there and given the opportunity they can put those talents to good use. (Big Local Worker).

2.3.2. Practice-based learning

The skills and capabilities for resident-led change were also learnt through doing: much learning was practice-based. A Big Local worker described how getting on with organising events helped to build relationships, skills and confidence:

working together to organise ... [activities] is what makes the difference. ... Any one of the residents on the partnership could now talk about how a resident-led programme works and effectively join another group. They have learnt how meetings work, how groups work, and are more confident.

In most areas, there has been a process of trial and error and both the successes and challenges along the way have led to learning and the development of additional skills and capabilities, including being reflexive. Many people found themselves in at the deep end and learnt through action. This was often highly rewarding, boosting confidence which in turn helped maintain engagement and future skills development. Learning through doing, however, has its limits, not least of which is that knowledge and confidence are bounded by practical experience. It is hard to understand what support you need for unfamiliar tasks and projects (see section 3).

2.3.3. Peer-learning

Learning from peers was also important, whether this was from other residents within a Big Local partnership or from partnership members in other Big Local areas. More than four out of five of the respondents to Local Trust’s 2024 survey of all partnership members said that they had learnt new things from people involved in their Big Local area, whilst almost half had learnt things from people in other areas. They talked, for example, about observing how others managed meetings or being inspired by the stories told by partnership members from other areas about how they had engaged with their wider communities to assess needs. Knowledge and skills were shared, and the practice of resident-led change was modelled for others. Sometimes this was entirely directed by residents themselves; often it was facilitated through the programme (e.g. through networking meetings organised by Local Trust). As one resident reflected:

I’m just a labourer really. You go and meet people like [NAME] that’s done all these things before and that is where you pick up things; if you’re prepared to pick them up.

Peer-learning included learning about what didn’t work as well as what did. One OBS respondent, for example, reflected on how they had come to understand more about

power in partnerships through observing and listening to what was going on in another area:

Meeting lots and lots of other people from Big Locals, there is a certain lack of openness, there's a power base of often one person, two persons, at the very most three. They've struggled to gather people around them. Well, is that because nobody will join or is it because those people don't want other people to become part of it. You know, you have to have the conversation – 'where does the power lie and who has got the power'. (Partnership member)

2.3.4. Professional learning

Alongside learning from each other, skills and capabilities have also been learnt from and passed on by community development professionals. These may have been Big Local workers, LTO or other locally based workers or through Big Local reps and area advisors, and the various other, more formal, support mechanisms that the programme facilitated such as through national providers. Big Local workers modelled facilitation, negotiation and organising skills and created an environment where residents had opportunities to try things out, step up and play a leading role. In some areas, they mentored residents who were recruited to paid Big Local roles. In one area, the worker took residents through youth work training programmes which fostered learning around community engagement, group dynamics, safeguarding, relationship building and communication skills.

In the following section we analyse how the Big Local programme – through its dual conditions of providing funding and support- enabled the development of these skills and capabilities required for resident-led change.

Programme conditions affecting the development of skills and capabilities

3.1. Introduction

All funding programmes have conditions associated with them. These include who can access the funding, what it can be spent on, how it can be spent, what its anticipated impact will be, and how this must be monitored and evaluated. How many and what exactly these conditions will be, are decisions that are generally based on a set of theories or assumptions about the programme and what it is trying to achieve. Each of these decisions will have consequences for programme delivery. Big Local is unusual in its experimental and non-prescriptive nature, but even here decisions were and have continued to be made about such conditions, with implications for the resident-led change it sought to realise, and the practices, skills and capabilities that were built along the way.

Underpinning the Big Local programme is a hypothesis about resident led change: *“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.). This suggests that the two key programme conditions understood to build agency and so create positive change in communities, through the mechanism of resident-leadership, are (long-term) funding and support. In this section we interrogate these programme conditions, focusing our analysis on how they have affected the development of the skills and capabilities for resident-led change with OBS areas.

3.2. Funding

Three key aspects associated with the awarding of funding to each of the Big Local areas were highlighted as being particularly significant to the development of the practices, skills and capabilities for resident-led change:

- That it is residents-led.
- That it is non-prescriptive.
- That it is long-term.

Each are explored below in terms of their implications for the skills and capabilities for resident-led change.

3.2.1 Resident-led funding

A key condition of the Big Local programme is that the funding is controlled by residents – it is a resident-led programme, and this is reflected in who holds and controls the money (see SCLA, 2024, for a fuller examination of the relationship between money and power in Big Local, concluding that money is both a source of power and an enabler of further power, including through building residents' skills and capabilities). Resident led funding is realised in several ways, including through the stipulation that each participating area established a partnership which should be formed with a minimum of 51 per cent of its members being residents. Partnership members then had to consult with their local communities and develop a plan for how the money should be spent. Whilst a Locally Trusted Organisation (LTO) is chosen in each area to manage the money, it was designed to be the residents – through the partnership – who made decisions about how the money was spent, not the LTO (see further discussion below about role of LTO in supporting resident-led change). Trust in residents to make decisions about how the money should be spent was seen as fundamental to, and different about, the programme. An explicit link was made between the control given to residents over how the money was spent and the learning that this would lead to, which was recognised by Local Trust staff and partnership members alike:

And I think the thing that I have learned across this period is that Big Local was an experiment they were seeing if you could put this much money in the hands of the community and would it work? And yes it did work here. And yes, there have been projects that haven't turned out quite how we hoped they would, but that's learning. (Partnership member)

...the areas have that money, and they get to decide where that is spent. But you know they can take risks. They can learn about things along the way. It doesn't all have to work as long as there is learning and development along the way as well. (Local Trust staff member)

Funding decisions being resident-led, and the associated guidance around partnership formation and process, have been instrumental in the development of the skills and capabilities for resident-led change. It is through having to form and become part of a partnership, bringing (often diverse) residents together, having to consult with wider community members, needing to analyse different forms of data and make decisions about how to allocate the funding accordingly, that residents have been able to build – or realise – many of the skills and capabilities for resident-led change.

This has not, however, always been easy, and it has not been without controversy. At the start of the programme some questioned whether residents could be trusted with the funding, whether the level of risk for the inappropriate usage of the funds was too high. Such concerns have proved unfounded – throughout OBS we have seen residents take on the responsibility for ensuring (what they perceived to be) the best use of the funding for their areas. This was well recognised across the programme:

I hope that funders can take some learning from that side of it that you can trust communities and they will be more diligent about money than anyone else. You know they... will make sure every penny is spent effectively, far more than any business or organisation. So I think that's really powerful. (Local Trust staff member)

Rather than the risk being the inappropriate use of funds, it has been suggested that the greater risk is of resident burnout – for partnership members bearing the burden of responsibility and the emotional toll of feeling accountable to fellow residents for how the money is spent and what it achieves. It was suggested that this experience

had in itself led to the development of emotional intelligence and resilience, which were recognised as important capabilities for resident-led change:

I do think community leadership comes with a lot of certain pressures that people in paid employment just don't experience. It's just like, you know, you're doing it for free. It's endless. And the people who want you to do things live next door to you. And if you fail, you know... I always laugh because people would say, oh, people will just be wasting the money. And I'm like, no, if anything, they feel like so much accountability, more than anyone in a job would. And that's really stressful. So like, resilience is a really important characteristic. (Local Trust staff member)

There has been learning within OBS areas about how to assess and analyse needs, to plan strategically and to allocate resources accordingly, and sometimes this learning has been greatest when challenges have been faced and overcome.

On occasion, however, there has also been considerable hurt and damage to confidence and relationships when things have not gone to plan, conflict has inevitably arisen within areas, and appropriate support has not been available/accessed (section 2). Whilst managing and learning from conflict was recognised as central to the practice of resident-led change and had led to the development of important skills and capabilities, some questioned whether there are or should be additional guardrails for those involved in resident-led funding. There was a recognition of the need to ensure that when residents control funding they are *appropriately* supported to do so.

3.2.2 Non-prescriptive funding

A second, associated, feature of the Big Local funding is that it is non-prescriptive. Beyond working towards the four broad Big Local outcomes (Wilson et al., 2024) there was relatively little prescription as to *how* the money should be spent or *to what ends*. This was seen as distinct from other programmes in that there were few restrictions around what the money could be used or for what purposes. Whilst each area had to develop and submit plans that were assessed and subject to (light touch) approval, Local Trust were non-prescriptive in terms of what those plans should consist of. There were no externally imposed targets or outputs – residents decided what was needed in their area and how to make this happen at a pace that suited them (SCLA, 2024), and reporting was deliberately kept to a minimum to reduce the burden on volunteers.

In the 2024 survey of all partnership members carried out by Local Trust, 88 per cent of respondents (383 out of 434) agreed or strongly agreed that the Big Local programme had given them the freedom to do things their way. Many OBS partnership members valued the lack of prescription, and the opportunities that it led to in terms of deciding for themselves how they wanted to spend the funding and to what ends. It was through developing the practices of listening to the community, identifying needs, prioritising and strategizing that was required in order to develop their own visions and plans that they came to realise a range of different skills and capabilities.

Some struggled to assess needs, to come up with a vision, or to develop a strategic plan. Some were arguably too ambitious in their plans leading to disappointment, some perhaps were not ambitious enough leading to disappointment about what had been achieved, and in some of these cases rather than building confidence, confidence was knocked. Indeed, some respondents suggested that the lack of prescription left residents vulnerable when things did not go smoothly. Striking the right balance between freedom and control, power and responsibility, support and challenge, has been an ongoing dilemma, the responses to which have varied at different points in the programme.

There has been learning for Local Trust in this. As the programme has progressed, and particularly as it moves towards its conclusion, Local Trust are arguably becoming more actively engaged in what areas can and cannot do with their remaining money, primarily out of a concern to ensure that all Big Local areas can fully spend out for the benefit of their communities.

3.2.3 Long-term funding

The third, and most explicit, pillar for the funding associated with Big Local is that it is long-term. The funding was available for a period of 10-12 years. Our analysis suggests that the long-term nature of the funding was fundamental to the learning of the skills and capabilities associated with the practices of resident-led change as outlined in section two. At the start of the programme, the money felt like a big responsibility but as time went on this feeling lessened and partnerships became more comfortable with the accountability it brought. The extended funding-period enabled learning through not rushing residents, through allowing them to learn by doing and to work through challenges. Ultimately this led to the development of capabilities including individual and collective agency over change in their neighbourhood. For example, most areas experienced some form of conflict at some point in the programme, but whilst this could have been disastrous in a short-term funding programme, the extended time-period (often) enabled residents to work through the issues:

...I think the key value is the long term piece because I think even where you see Big Locals go through real periods of instability or conflict, actually being able to take that long term view and see that as a step on a journey and actually see areas, or partnerships, or you know where there's been complete relationship breakdown, to see that come out the other side and be stronger for it and be able to say, well actually we've learnt from this one incident or situation and this is how we're changing things moving forward. I think that's the most valuable thing. (Local Trust staff member)

However, alongside all the widely recognised positives associated with the long-term nature of the funding and the development of skills and capabilities that this enabled, our analysis also highlights challenges. For some residents, partnership members in particular, maintaining the level of commitment and energy demanded by a long-term programme was challenging. Life did not standstill for communities or for individual residents whilst they were involved in the programme, rather the programme demanded the attention of residents at the same time as they were dealing with complex unfolding personal and area level circumstances:

And they've stuck with it through [...] really challenging moments for them personally, and having all sorts of other things going on in their lives, knowing that Big Local is a very small part of that. But to be able to stick with it and to do what they've done, I think it always just strikes me that it's been like really quite amazing. (Local Trust staff member)

'Sticking with it' and in doing so demonstrating and developing persistence and resilience were identified as important capabilities for resident-led change enabled by the long-term nature of the funding within Big Local.

One resident noted that the foundations took time to build and Big Local gave them the time to do this. Another said that having a longer timeframe took the pressure off people dropping out as there was time to bring others in. Learning to be patient in the face of set-backs and slow responses from public agencies also came up, alongside a reflection that a long stretch of time means you can accept that some things land, and some things don't. As a partnership chair noted:

Most people totally overestimate what they can achieve in one year, but they also tend to totally underestimate what they can achieve in 10 years if they keep at it – tenacity pays off.

3.3. Support

Alongside funding, the provision of support has been the second key condition of Big Local. Whilst some areas may have had the skills and capabilities required for resident-led change, most did not or at least were working in contexts where these had not been realised, as reflected through their selection to become Big Local areas. Our analysis has identified two key dimensions of support within Big Local which have, in particular, enabled the development of the skills and capabilities for resident-led change: that it has been long-term, available consistently throughout the duration of the programme; and that it has been multi-faceted, available in different forms from multiple sources.

There has been considerable variation between areas in the OBS sample, and over time, in terms of the support that has been needed, how they have engaged with support, and the difference that support has made (see Wilson et al., 2023). A 2024 survey of partnership members across the whole programme by Local Trust found that 82 per cent of respondents (357) agreed or strongly agreed that, overall, they had received the kind of help support that they wanted from Local Trust. Here our analysis focuses on how the long-term and multi-faceted nature of the support offer has shaped the development of the skills and capabilities associated with the practice of resident-led change.

3.3.1. Consistent support

As with the funding, a key condition of support available to communities for resident-led change through Big Local was that it has been long-term: available to Big Local areas for over a decade, allowing the time needed to realise the skills and capabilities for resident-led change. As one Local Trust staff member reflected:

The key thing I've learnt from the programme is the critical importance of the support partners, whether that's the LTO or Local Trust and its staff, to keep the plates spinning because these things are really challenging to do alone. Communities, particularly those [areas] that have been evidenced to have less social capital [...], have got quite a distance to travel to feel confident in doing that. I think you can't underestimate how much effort it takes to keep that support going because as soon as you take your foot off the gas things slow right down, or [...] challenges emerge, because people, communities, lose confidence [...] I don't think they lack capability, they lack confidence that what they're doing is the right thing or is going to yield the results that they want.

It is not just the consistency of the support offer in general over the long term that is important but also continuity within individual support providers, particularly reps and LTOs. The importance of relational approaches to support have been highlighted elsewhere (Wilson et al., 2023), and the long-term nature of the programme has been central to the development of such relationships. The building of in-depth knowledge amongst support providers of areas and residents has enabled the support to be responsive to needs, including working through challenging times. This has been important to the development of the skills and capabilities for resident-led change, particularly those associated with being able to manage and learn from conflict:

I see it as people have learnt most when those things have started to go wrong and been supported, let's look at this from a different perspective, let's see how

we can help it to go... you've seen partnerships go through turbulent times and come out of the other end of it with a bit of support. (Local Trust staff member)

Knowing when to intervene – when additional support might be required by areas even if not asked for – has been an area of learning for Local Trust and other support providers involved in Big Local:

I think the learning is that if you jump in with 'the professional, the experts', with 'what's going to work and what isn't' then you're just going to flatten everything before it begins. I'd say that's something the programme's demonstrated. (Local Trust staff member)

Sometimes support had come too late, leaving areas to struggle alone; sometimes it had come too soon, or been too directive, stifling the learning for residents that came through working it out for themselves. Some suggested that it had been “naïve” to think that communities could do it alone – that they need to be supported in their learning of the practices of resident-led change.

Whilst support has been consistently available, it has changed over time, including becoming more focused, and – towards the final stages of the programme - more directive, particularly in areas that are at risk of not fully delivering their plans. This is perhaps inevitable – within a long-term programme, what residents need to get started in resident-led change is unlikely to be the same as what they need after ten years of practice. At the start, for example, areas often needed support around assessing local needs, strategising and building engagement; towards the middle of the programme support needs often focused on project management, managing conflict, or maintaining the energy and enthusiasm needed for resident-led change; towards the end of the programme the focus has often been on buildings ownership or setting up and running new organisations to continue resident-led decision-making and change beyond the Big Local programme.

Areas are responding differently to the more differentiated and interventionist approach that Local Trust has adopted in the later years of the programme. Some are pushing back, keen to continue with their own way of doing things in line with their original plans (even if these now seem unlikely to succeed), whereas others seem to feel a sense of relief.

3.3.2. Multi-layered support

A second key feature of the support provided through Big Local has been that it is multi-layered and multi-faceted – different forms, functions and sources of support have been provided. As figure 1, taken from Wilson et al. (2023) illustrates, it has included the provision of technical expertise, skills development, guidance and information sharing, relationship building, peer support and adding capacity. This has been delivered through paid workers employed directly and indirectly by Local Trust, training, consultancy, the facilitation of networking, workshops, mentoring and the provision of on and offline resources and newsletters.

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



Here we focus on the different actors who have provided support to areas, as our analysis suggests that it is the mix of residents, reps, LTOs, workers and additional support providers – and the different skills and capabilities that each possessed, built and passed on that has been crucial to learning the practice of resident led change. The mix of actors involved in supporting residents – and how this varies – is one of the factors that can help to explain why some areas have been able to make greater progress towards the four Big Local outcomes than others (see Wilson et al., 2024). Several respondents talked about the importance of not just the mix of players involved but also the relationships between them. As one Local Trust member of staff reflected:

I think it's this combination of all these different players and each area being so unique that makes it difficult to understand if there a single model that's been most effective.

It was suggested that workers, reps and LTOs have been particularly important in terms of the development of skills and capabilities for resident-led change, especially in Big Local areas where those skills were not evident at the start. Workers were employed by partnerships (via their LTOs) to undertake a variety of different roles and had varied backgrounds, but in general provided an important source of community development skills and capabilities. In many areas the transfer of such skills from workers to residents has been crucial in enabling partnerships to deliver projects effectively (Local Trust, 2022). They cajoled, facilitated, negotiated and organised when necessary and created an environment where residents had the opportunity to step up to try things out and go on to take a leading role. They highlighted local training opportunities when they were needed and supported residents to take them up. They mentored residents who were themselves recruited in to paid roles within Big Local. In one area, a cohort of residents were taken through a youth training programme, which fostered learning around community engagement, group dynamics, safeguarding, relationship building and communication skills.

Local Trust's early reliance on Big Local reps, initially contracted by an external partner organisation, and subsequent employment of area coordinators and contracting of area advisors to provide ongoing or specialist support as needed, can be seen as a recognition of the importance of this role and the community development expertise that it represents. The in-house area coordinator roles built internal expertise, knowledge, relationships and control. These roles reflected the changing needs of areas as the programme unfolded, and learning within Local Trust about who could best support resident-led change. They were also a Local Trust response to changes in the availability of skilled community development workers who were more plentiful in the early years of Big Local but more scarce towards the end as funding and training

for such roles had been withdrawn. Indeed, in recognition of the vital role that workers and reps have played in building the skills and capabilities for resident-led change, some questioned whether Local Trust could have done more, sooner, to support the development of Big Local workers.

It was suggested by some within Local Trust that further efforts to embed capabilities for community development work at the local level, going beyond supporting residents to also support networks of community development workers and strengthening local civil society infrastructure, may have helped to further ensure the sustainability of the changes made through the programme. Learning also came from the support and expertise provided by external consultants and other support providers contracted by or partnering with Local Trust. This often focused on specialist technical expertise, helping to build areas' capacities and capabilities to deliver and benefit from Big Local.

Support provision, of all kinds, however, has varied in quality (Wilson et al., 2023). This could make a critical difference to the development of the skills and capabilities for resident led change amongst partnership members, and ultimately to the success of the programme. The ability of support providers to build relationships with residents in Big Local areas was seen to be a key part of this. Whilst reviews of support providers have generally been positive, concerns were raised when they felt too distant – geographically or socially (in terms of age, gender, class and ethnicity, for example). It was suggested, for example, that middle class consultants who were brought in to provide specific areas of support within working class communities were not able to relate to residents and that this created a barrier to effective learning.

Respondents talked about the importance of all those involved in supporting resident-led change being able to:

- Build relationships with residents.
- Be self-aware.
- Work without ego.
- Put the needs of communities and residents first.
- Be asset based.
- Be inclusive communicators, able to adapt to very different audiences.
- Be active listeners.
- Be able to bring people on board, and build engagement.
- Challenge when necessary.
- Manage conflict and challenge power imbalances.

Having appropriately skilled support providers (workers/reps/LTOs/consultants) increased the chances of capabilities being built within Big Local areas. When they did not there was a chance of the opposite happening. As one person reflected:

I think in some respects some are really empowered and some are really disempowered as in some have got training and support and developed and some haven't. (Local Trust staff member)

There are examples from across the 150 Big Local areas where LTOs, reps, Big Local workers or other support providers did not fully support the resident-led ethos of the programme and did little to empower residents to take the lead. For these areas, the skills and capabilities identified lay with the professionals and were not effectively passed on to residents.

Conclusions

The research for this report has addressed the following question:

What are the skills and capabilities which underpin the practice of resident-led community change, and how has the Big Local programme enabled their development?

OBS research shows how those involved in Big Local, partnership members in particular, had learned more than they thought they would when they first got involved, and that individuals were more confident in what they knew and in explaining the things they had learnt to other people.

Four broad conclusions can be drawn from the research:

First, at least eight **sets of core practices, skills and capabilities have been built over the course of Big Local**. These focus on practical tasks associated with resident-led community change:

1. Listening to the whole community and identifying needs.
2. Creating a vision and being strategic.
3. Residents working together and making collective decisions.
4. Engaging and communicating with the wider community.
5. Delivering projects, activities and events.
6. Managing and learning from conflict.
7. Understanding power and working with others.
8. Reflecting on what has and hasn't worked and accessing support.

In many ways these reflect previous understandings of good community development practice. These practices, skills and capabilities are of vital importance to programme outcomes, as evidenced in *Understanding Success* (Wilson et al., 2024), but they can also be outcomes in their own right.

Second, **beneath the surface of these core sets of practices associated with resident-led change lies a whole host of more specific, hard and soft, skills and capabilities**. Often these are reduced to defined competencies, but our analysis shows that **it is often the far less tangible beliefs, attitudes, motivation, mindsets and emotional resilience of residents that was key**. Working through these practices and developing these skills and capabilities, with support, created self-belief amongst residents that they could make change happen and deal with challenges along the way, from knock backs from a local authority to disagreements and conflict

within the community. Big Local partnerships became credible bodies but most significantly, they created a culture of confidence.

Third, **the design of the Big Local programme played a key role in enabling the skills and capabilities required for resident led change.** This becomes apparent with respect to two main aspects of the programme: funding and support. A key characteristic common to both was the provision of time. Big Local funding was patient, provided over a long term, non-prescriptive and put residents in charge; and support was consistently available throughout the programme in multiple ways ensuring it was (largely) responsive and tailored to the needs to those involved in resident-led change. Funding and support enabled the skills and capabilities for resident-led change to develop over time through four routes: prior learning, realised through engagement; learning from doing; learning from peers; learning from professional including Big Local workers, LTOs and reps working at the local level, and from (relatable) external support providers. The value of time – providing funding and support for over a decade – has been particularly evident in enabling the development of skills and capabilities for resident-led change. At the heart of Big Local has been the time to build partnerships and understand what was needed, to engage people in the process, to learn from what has worked and what has not, and to work through challenges and conflicts. It allowed residents to proceed at their own pace but also to provide additional support where residents faced barriers.

Fourth, however, the **skills and capabilities for resident-led change were not evenly distributed or built through the programme** – there are variations within and across areas, and over time. Skills and capabilities were held or built for some residents, partnership members, and workers more than others. Whilst sometimes they were widely distributed across the community, in others they were held by a small number of partnership members, and in some they were held by workers – or other professionals – but not passed on or learnt by others. When community development professionals fully and actively supported the resident-led ethos of the programme there was a greater chance of the required skills and capabilities being more widely distributed. Similarly, when partnership members accessed the support on offer to them, from Local Trust and beyond, there was a greater chance of the skills and capabilities for resident-led change being learnt, applied, and passed on. The different starting points of communities, and the unfolding of individual, organisational and area level contexts also made a difference.

Overall, the findings reveal that **the learning of new skills and capabilities, whether formal or informal, hard or soft, brings a ‘learned optimism’ about resident-led community change.** It expands ideas of both what is imaginable and possible. We found evidence from both Big Local areas and research with Local Trust staff that **what often mattered most was the development of a shared learned optimism of what could be achieved.** This sense of confidence was for many, in Big Local areas and in Local Trust, something that needed to be developed. In many respects such beliefs and attitudes are longer in development than formal skills. They are handed on and over not simply through training or development, but through practice and engagement. They work with intrinsic motivations to engage in resident-led change and the development of common goals. There are lessons here for how resident-led change happens but also how funders provide support. In many respects it is less about the development of formal competences but about confidence, relationships, communication and trust. This is the exact opposite of the common experience of ‘learned helplessness’ or the giving up of trying to change an existing set of adverse circumstances.

Learned optimism in Big Local's approach to resident-led community change seems to be the element which brings together the way in which skills and capabilities are developed and is the result of an interplay between Big Local areas and the patient finance and support provided over a long term. This is not, however, something that communities can learn by themselves, and – whilst powerful – is not enough to overcome the structural challenges which many individuals and communities continue to face.

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