



Third Sector Research Centre



Big Local as Change Agent

Angus McCabe, Mandy Wilson and Rob Macmillan

With: Paul Morgans, Phil Ware and Creative Media

February 2020



Contents: Big Local as Change Agent

	Page number
Summary: key messages	2
1 Introduction: about this report	4
2 Change in Big Local	6
2.1 Understanding change in Big Local	6
2.2 Change for individuals	8
2.3 Change for groups and organisations	11
2.4 Broader community change	15
3 How change happens	23
3.1 Who helps deliver change?	23
3.2 What helps generate change?	25
4 The challenges and dilemmas of resident-led change	38
4.1 Internal challenges: partnership working	38
4.2 Exerting influence: external forces	39
5 Conclusions and reflections	41
5.1 The Big Local approach	41
5.2 The community dimension	44
Appendix: Evaluation methods	47

Acknowledgements

The Our Bigger Story evaluation team would like to thank residents and organisations in the 15 case study areas for all their contributions over the last three years. The Big Local case studies are:

Barrowcliff, Scarborough

Birchfield, Birmingham

Bountagu, Enfield

Catton Grove, Norwich

Grassland Hasmoor, Chesterfield and N.E. Derbyshire

Growing Together, Northampton

Hanwell, Ealing

Lawrence Weston, Bristol

Northfleet, Kent

Radstock and Westfield, Somerset

Ramsey, Cambridgeshire

Revoe, Blackpool

Three Parishes, Shropshire

Westfield, Sheffield

Whitley Bay, North Tyneside

Summary: key messages

Big Local is a long-term resident-led programme established in 2010 which provides resources and support to 150 communities across England. It is supported by Local Trust and operates with an underpinning ethos expressed in the hypothesis that *'long term funding and support to build capacity gives residents in hyper local areas agency to take decisions and to act to create positive and lasting change'*. This highlights the significance of **agency** in generating **change**.

['Our Bigger Story'](#) is the longitudinal multi-media evaluation that runs alongside Big Local, charting the stories of change in 15 different Big Local areas, covering urban, rural and seaside communities. Based on evaluation research between 2017 and 2019¹, **this report explores Big Local as a catalytic 'change agent'**, looking at the nature of change, and the differences Big Local is making in these areas.

There are three main messages from this wave of the evaluation:

1. **Change associated with Big Local is multi-faceted.** It can be seen in lots of different ways for individuals, local groups and across communities as a whole. It can involve, for example, reducing social isolation, boosting confidence and aspirations, building new skills and employment opportunities, developing community groups, voluntary organisations and new ventures, opening community hubs and spaces, improving the physical environment, and helping to generate a greater sense of community spirit and cohesion. Big Local also involves important **convening and coordinating powers**, although the impact on higher level strategic developments is less developed at this stage in the programme. (See section 2)
2. **Big Local mobilises a range of actors, resources and approaches to create change.** It brings together residents as both active partnership members and volunteers, specialist paid workers, support from expert Reps and Locally Trusted Organisations (LTOs), and other agencies created or engaged to coordinate and deliver activities. Change is generated through a combination of Big Local funding and other leveraged resources, capacity building at local and national levels, but crucially through **local knowledge and commitment - a passion about place**. (See section 3)
3. **Resident-led change faces significant challenges and dilemmas.** These can be 'internal' in terms of personalities, power struggles and the inaccessible ways in which partnerships sometimes operate. But crucially they also relate to 'external' forces and wider policy change. There is limited understanding of, and scope for, influencing key strategic decision-makers and other pressures which affect the community. **Influence is stronger within Big Local areas rather than on those that lie beyond them.** (See section 4)

¹ There are four phases of evaluation; the first phase covered 2015-2016, the second phase 2017-2019. There will be two more phases, 2020-2022 and 2023-2025.

The Big Local model provides significant resources for resident-led action, but also combines a patient time-scale, additional support, an institutional structure of partnerships and Locally Trusted Organisations, and a hyper-local community approach. The report concludes that the **support and resources available to Big Local areas are just a starting point, for bringing about resident-led change.**

Introduction

This report explores Big Local as a catalytic 'change agent' across the 15 urban, rural and seaside areas involved in Our Bigger Story (OBS) – the longitudinal, multi-media, evaluation of Big Local. The learning is primarily based on evaluation activity between 2017 and 2019 but also draws upon the first OBS paper (2017), 'Big Local: Beyond the early years' and the initial [NCVO evaluation](#) (2014), 'Big Local: the early years'. It can be read in conjunction with three thematic reports produced in the current phase of the evaluation on the meaning of [resident led change](#), different approaches to promoting [community leadership](#) and 'outside in' views on Big Local provided by external stakeholders. This report is accompanied by a summative film, [Big Local: Changing Communities](#), which records change across the 15 OBS areas and an animated film, *Big Local Voices: reflections on power*. Details of the research methods and evaluation activities are included in Appendix 1.

The extent to which Big Local is a 'change agent' necessitates understanding the change that Big Local aims to achieve, and the differences that Big Local is making for individuals, groups and the wider community. It also requires an exploration of the nature of change – whether this involves tangible physical changes such as visible environmental improvements or the intangible changes of how people think and feel both about themselves and their wider community.

In pursuing this, the intention is to analyse the factors which support residents taking action, and to review, in more detail:

- the **strategies being adopted by Big Local partnerships to affect change** - ranging from the use of small grants, through to building the capacity of local groups, directly delivering or commissioning services, and/or efforts to influence broader strategic decisions which, at a policy level, impact on their community, and
- the **challenges of bringing about resident led change** at the 'hyper-local' level². These may include intra-community factors such as a history of tensions within and between communities locally, but also the impact of broader policy and planning initiatives on local communities.

The following sections of this report therefore reflect on and analyse the:

- change Big Local is making in communities (section 2),
- strategies adopted to affect change (section 3), and
- factors which can facilitate or hinder change in Big Local as a long term initiative (section 4).

A concluding section (section 5) reflects on a critical stage in the evolution of Big Local – namely, the move from formation ([NCVO; 2014](#)) to delivery ([Big Local](#);

² 'Hyper-local' refers to the size of Big Local areas which are often smaller than local authority wards and, in terms of those areas involved in the evaluation, range in population size from just under 3,000 to just over 11,000 (OCSI; Local Insight)

[beyond the early years 2017](#)) and on into Big Local areas 'spending out' and planning their legacy.

Learning from these transitions helps to test the Local Trust research hypothesis that:

'Long term funding and support to build capacity gives residents in hyper local areas agency to take decisions and to act to create positive and lasting change'.

By focusing on the theme of hyper-local change (and the facilitators of, and barriers to, change) this report is predicated on testing the assumption that change is, in itself, an indicator that capacity and agency have, and are being, built through the Big Local approach.

2 Change in Big Local

Change is a complex, multi-dimensional process. A neat demonstration of this is captured in the account provided by one of the OBS reflective diary keepers:

'Change is an inevitable part of Big Local. People change, priorities change, the very landscape and population changes. Young people become young adults with new interests and workers become retired and have different needs. It's a constant ebb and flow of a multitude of changes including a tide of people with us having such a transient appeal...just as you feel you have made headway with one element the goal posts have changed, and everyone is now expecting a different outcome!'

What this reflects is that change is often a non-linear process, and is affected by many things, which are often outside the sphere of Big Local. Rapid changes can be made – and then stall, and vice-versa. Second, change takes time, whether in terms of the development of large capital projects such as community hubs, or in the development of residents' mind-sets and aspirations and the creation of 'agency' to make things happen. Finally, change may be fragile, or it can be sustained and built on over time. On the one hand Big Local areas have seen the closure of partner/delivery agencies or even Locally Trusted Organisations (LTOs), but on the other they have supported the development of green energy initiatives (for example in Lawrence Weston) and have embedded the Big Local approach in other organisations (for example in Northampton through the merger of the Growing Together Big Local partnership and the LTO, Blackthorn Good Neighbours).

Big Local can be a catalyst for, or a facilitator of, change at different levels: change for individual residents, for local groups and organisations and for the wider community.

2.1 Understanding Change in Big Local

Big Local is based on a long term and resident led approach that seeks to create lasting change in communities. Counter to conventional programmes that rely on top down project led and time limited funding, Local Trust believes that *'significant change in any place takes time and has to be founded on and around the people who live there'* ([Local Trust website](#))

At its heart are four Big Local outcomes:

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

It is with these outcomes in mind that each Big Local partnership determines the priorities for its own area and produces and reviews community plans to make change happen. These plans comprise a vision for the area, an action plan and costings. From September 2019, they also include a legacy statement to illustrate their direction of travel beyond the life of Big Local.

Visions for change are inevitably broad based and there are commonalities across many of the plans regarding general themes such as facilities for children and young people, improvements to the environment and community engagement. The specifics though, related to the 'what' and the 'how' vary in line with the local context and are therefore different across the areas. There are those, for example, which place a strong emphasis on supporting the delivery of local services for a particular group (eg young people in Hanwell). In Three Parishes, a key theme is changing modes of service delivery (eg advice services) so that these are accessible locally. Others have adopted more economically focused change strategies – such as Ramsey's work on heritage to increase visitor footfall and build the local economy – through to Birchfield where there is ongoing work on building community based social enterprises

There are those, such as Lawrence Weston, where the ambitious emphasis is on demographic change through supporting housing initiatives which aim to diversify tenure patterns. Some areas focus on smaller scale, though important, projects to promote change through raising community aspirations (Revoe and Birchfield). For many areas the key focus is on establishing or maintaining a viable community hub as a means of both building community cohesion and facilitating community activities and action (Northfleet). The emphasis, in terms of change, can, therefore, shift (and move between) promoting soft change (attitudes and aspirations) and more physical and environmental initiatives (Growing Together)

In terms of this shifting balance of change objectives between hard/environmental change and a more people focused approach, the Barrowcliff Big Local Plan 2018-2020 aspires to '*A safe, clean and attractive neighbourhood that people are proud of and where everyone has the best possible chances in life*'. Its associated priorities (or 'five wishes') which focus on the environment, community facilities, education and jobs, health and lifestyle, and community safety have remained roughly the same since the first Barrowcliff Plan in 2014. However, the planned actions to make change happen have altered in the light of progress and achievements as well as increased knowledge about the community, how best to engage people and greater learning about how to coordinate and work strategically with other organisations and agencies to make change happen.

Similarly in Radstock and Westfield (hereafter referred to as Radstock), the aspiration has been to change patterns of obesity and build health and wellbeing. The strategy for doing so is, however, in the process of change as the planned community kitchen in the new GP surgery (which the partnership had worked on for over three years) was seen as no longer viable either financially or in terms of anticipated impact.

The sections below explore the changes taking place in Big Local communities for individuals, groups and organisations, and at a broader community level.

2.2. Change for individuals

Change for individuals is frequently linked to the levels of activity supported or generated through the Big Local process – typically through small grants, such as the [Small Sparks](#) scheme in Whitley Bay and the use of Dragon’s Den funds in Radstock to [promote health and wellbeing](#). Interviews with local residents and other stakeholders in the majority of OBS areas identified increased local activities which benefit individuals.

The findings of an evaluation activity survey (completed by 11 of the 15 areas) between August and October 2019 found activities range from:

- Regular small scale, arts, crafts, ‘knit and natter’ and luncheon groups,
- Targeted support for, in particular, [young people](#) (Growing Together, Hanwell, Ramsey Million), [families](#) (Barrowcliff) and older residents (Bountagu, Growing Together),
- More developmental support for individuals interested in and creating social/micro-enterprises; for example, the support for [social enterprise networking](#) in the Three Parishes and the Social Enterprise Hub (working with over 30 individuals/small groups) in Birchfield.

Activity does not, however, always equate with change. What changes, then, are these relatively small scale interventions bringing about in people’s lives?

Activities that help to reduce loneliness

A common theme, in the light of the Jo Cox Commission ([Combatting loneliness one conversation at a time](#)) and the announcement of the Government’s Strategy (2018) to combat loneliness³, that emerges is the **reduction of social isolation**:

In both the films from Growing Together about the [Brookside Community Hub](#) and [change for individuals in Lawrence Weston](#), local residents talk in greater detail throughout about the importance of a safe space and activities to combat loneliness and the changes these have made in their lives:

‘It’s become like family. It’s a support system’.

‘I lost my husband and was very depressed. I was at a loose end... it’s a place where I can go and know I am going to have a chat with someone. ... It’s helped me to get on with my life. It was my lifeline’.

³ See Public Health England (2015) *Local action on health inequalities Reducing social isolation across the lifecourse*. London, Public Health England
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/461120/3a_Social_isolation-Full-revised.pdf

DCMS (2018) *A connected society: a strategy for tackling loneliness - Laying the foundations for change* (London, Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport).
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-connected-society-a-strategy-for-tackling-loneliness>

This reduction in isolation is also reported by partnership members as a reason for their involvement in Big Local:

'I've lived in [names Big Local area] for 29 years but worked away from the area. When I retired a friend invited me to the lunch club and it's grown from there. We have made friends and it's changed our lives as we were very lonely.' (Big Local partnership member)

'I'm 65 and have not worked in 15 years. I have health problems but it [BL] keeps me going and keeps me involved.' (Big Local partnership member)

Activities that contribute to wellbeing

Beyond reducing loneliness, interviewees also reported that Big Local has provided opportunities through which individuals have flourished, for example by **building wellbeing through social activities**. All 15 Big Locals fund social activities such as café drop-ins, craft groups and gardening clubs. Interviews with participants across the country echo with descriptions of the significance of such activities to people's lives. Statements that 'it's like a family' and 'it lifts people's spirits' were common. One member of a 'knit and natter' group described how she only manages about four rows of knitting as the group is really about the natter. The comment from a partnership member below is typical:

'He came to [names group], and from that he then got involved with [person's name] on the allotment. And from that, he now has his own allotment next door; he's lost two stone in weight; his diabetes is under control. He now goes up on a Saturday morning and sits in the garden and sits chatting away to people, he knows everybody. The man is transformed' (Big Local partnership member).

And another observed:

'It's like [names person] started off, she came – when she first came here she was on the computer all the time looking for a job, she started volunteering, now she's working here, and we should be capturing that.' (Big Local partnership member).

Activities that promote involvement and influence

The growth in confidence, aspirations and the development of new skills has particular resonance for Big Local partnership members:

'Because I feel like I'm involved, I'm a part of the partnership, I feel needed and that people need it...you can make things happen. Even my kids have seen differences. Like I'll go home from work and I've got a smile on my face...It gives me freedom. Freedom to do what I think needs doing. I think that's what it is. It's also helped me make more friends. And gives me a life. A different kind.' (Resident who used the community centre, became a volunteer and is now a Big Local partnership member).

Other partnership members commented that:

'My confidence has soared, absolutely soared, because I've been involved in things, spoken to people and – yes, I'm a totally different personmeeting new people, being involved with something that I enjoy'

'I've never done this [voluntary/community work] before. I'm learning all the time. But helping people has given me a new lease of life.'

'...[He] came into this project completely new to all this stuff... From his world of work, his world of living....no idea what to do. And now, he's still learning – I think we're all learning, of course – but he has become a completely different character around this project...now he knows how to get funding, who to speak to, you know, where the layers [i.e. layers of influence] are'.

Activities that engage young people

Work with young people highlights the emphasis on **expanding opportunities and aspirations**. For example, Growing Together grants for drama activities enabled a group to grow and develop to the point where eight young people from [Silhouette youth theatre](#) have been accepted into the Royal Shakespeare Company's highly competitive youth programmes for actors and directors. Three young people have also sat on the RSC youth advisory board (and influenced the RSC decision to withdraw from a commercial sponsorship arrangement with BP).⁴

In another area a local social business reported that support from Big Local *'has enabled us to build links and take young people along to businesses and Universities in the city and show them they can do more, they can aspire to be more.'*

In Ramsey, young people attending its youth activities are encouraged to take up youth work training. One young man who at 14 was not attending school has now spent several years volunteering, completed youth work training levels 1 and 2, and is now in paid employment. He has gone from attending the Big Local play-scheme to facilitating others to come. He talks about not only getting something out of it but helping to give something back:

'It's made me a completely different person. And it opened up different opportunities'.

Activities that support enterprise and employment

There is also evidence of Big Local areas making funds available or brokering relationships with other organisations in order to help individuals **develop ideas for social enterprise or new businesses**.

⁴ For more information see <https://www.rsc.org.uk/news/we-are-to-conclude-our-partnership-with-bp>

A priority for Barrowcliff Big Local *'It's about stopping 'You can't do, to you can do.'* To achieve this, they have an agreement with their LTO, a credit union, to make loans to support individuals with business start-ups. This partnership, along with Birchfield, Northfleet and Bountagu Big Locals, is also part of the UnLtd and Big Local 'Enterprising Communities' programme. In Barrowcliff, UnLtd worked with the Big Local funded Sparks project to identify people they could 'take a risk with'. This provides small 'start-up' funds to people who would otherwise be unlikely to access support from mainstream institutions:

'The Big Local partnership have enabled this to happen, [we] can identify people in the area and we can take a chance on them which is hugely empowering. I think some people, it's the first time that they will have ever had anybody say to them, "Here's £500. Go and have a go at your idea.' (Big Local partnership member)

Other Big Locals are also providing funds to support business development, but it seems that it is not just the money that makes a difference, as with Three Parishes:

'Yes, the small grant was helpful in buying the new equipment....but it was the push they [Big Local workers] gave me that drove me to expand the business and take on the shop' (Resident/social entrepreneur).

Once again, Big Local can generate the energy and momentum to enable new things to happen in local communities. The resources certainly make a difference, but Big Local also works through its power of motivation and mobilisation. It makes opportunities available and enables them to be realised.

A common example of this is the **creation of employment opportunities**, not least in Big Local itself. Several residents have moved on from unemployment to posts with their Big Local in, for example, Northfleet, Radstock, Revoe and Ramsey. In both Birchfield and Ramsey, residents have moved into self-employment or established micro-social enterprises. Others have been able to move into employment through, for example, apprenticeships and training offered by Big Local partner/delivery agencies (see [Change in Northfleet film](#)), as indicated by this resident:

'I was a refugee and was unemployed for 11 years. I started volunteering here two years ago and then got a part time job with [names group initially supported by Big Local]. And I wasn't sure, but now I'm ready for full time work.'

2.3 Change for groups and organisations

There is strong evidence demonstrating the ways in which Big Local partnerships have supported the creation, growth and development of community and voluntary organisations. This is to be expected as all the 15 areas have run grants programmes for local organisations – offering funding at different scales to suit both small scale activity and more ambitious projects.

Grants and support

The 2019 Our Bigger Story evaluation 'Activities Survey' found that the number of grants made in each Big Local case study area varied from 3 to over 100. Several Big Locals have also commissioned local service provision – for example, youth work and play services. In addition to the money, organisations have often been supported by the time of a Big Local paid worker. The purpose and outcomes of this financial and developmental support varies. At one level it may involve straightforward grant-making. However, Big Local funding has also given groups a platform to highlight needs that may have been previously hidden, as seen in the example of the demand for youth counselling services in Ramsey, (in a short period of time the service was over-subscribed and had a waiting list). In another case, a Big Local provided 'emergency' funding, with other support, to tide a particular organisation over a short term financial crisis:

'Yes there was short term gap in funding....but to be honest we [names group] were not functioning that well...so Big Local support has been important in us becoming a bit more professional and business like – which has meant we have expanded our services. It's still hard...but we are in a better financial position now'.

In other areas such as Birchfield and Northfleet, free access to meeting space through Big Local has enabled new and emerging groups to test out ideas and new approaches without, in their initial development stage, the financial costs and risks of paying for room hire or access to equipment.

There is a question, however, over how sustainable activities funded through Big Local will be. Put bluntly, when the money stops, will the groups simply stop functioning? There is some evidence of how small initiatives supported by Big Local have moved on to secure other grant funding and/or contracts. Through this they have become independent of Big Local funding yet still provide services to local residents. Examples include the No Walls Garden in Northfleet, ATHAC - Access to Heritage Arts and Culture in Birchfield - and the Community Shop in Lawrence Weston which was 'piloted' by Big Local and then transferred to Oasis Academy.

Grassland Hasmoor Big Local is explicit about its ethos of nurturing groups and then supporting their independent development:

'...we start projects and then we want them to continue being run by groups, not necessarily by Big Local. One or two of them have gone from our leadership, and they are now being taken over by volunteer community groups, like the Pitstop Diner we basically signed over the Pitstop concept. ... and we've not walked away, there's still a lot of us do volunteer, ...been a transition of power. ...That really is a success, because that's the idea of any project that we do'.

Other examples which illustrate the **potential for long lasting change**:

- In **Lawrence Weston**, Big Local support has enabled the local church (through capital improvements to the building) to develop its community café

and other services and has facilitated a group of local residents to secure £100,000 in external funding to build a new play park.

- **Growing Together Big Local** provided many of its larger grants on a tapered funding model so that over time organisations need to show they are becoming more and more self-sufficient. The film '[Making A Difference through Growing Together](#)' demonstrates examples of this in practice: how an older people's group which once supported by a grant to Age UK is now run by its members, and how the pump priming of a youth focused social enterprise - Free 2 Talk - has contributed to its growth, diversified the funding base and enabled it to have a national platform.
- In **Whitley Bay** a whole range of groups that got off the ground with a small amounts of funding from Big Local, are now up and running with the commitment of volunteers. Larger projects such as the [Whitley Bay Carnival](#) are also now established entities in themselves with their own organisational structures.
- **Grassland Hasmoor** Big Local has developed a model whereby established 'working groups' become constituted as groups in their own right. This means they are driven by group members, as with the Green and Open Spaces group:

'You're talking about numbers in three figures.... volunteers on a regular basis, challenging, because they have been empowered to actually change the environment where they live.... That, to me, is a very powerful thing. They have been fired up. And now they're working away, encouraging more and more people to take a responsibility for their environment.' (Chair, Grassland Hasmoor Big Local).

- In **Ramsey**, the organisational growth of Ramsey Neighbourhood Trust (Ramsey Million's LTO), has developed 'symbiotically' with Ramsey Million. The Trust has increased its staffing base more than ten times over and secured funding from a range of sources, including a large grant from the National Lottery Community Fund. It has gradually built its organisational base and as the chair of Ramsey Million says, '*It's given us a confidence*'.

Building social infrastructure

This last example of the organisational growth of the Ramsey Million LTO illustrates how Big Locals are creating and transforming the local social infrastructure⁵. The merger of Growing Together Big Local and its LTO, Blackthorn Good Neighbours (BGN), into Growing Together Northampton has considerably strengthened community involvement in what was BGN's board of trustees and established an organisation which is 'fit for the future'. And in several areas, such as Radstock and Whitley Bay, Big Locals (with several others following close behind) have effectively

⁵ See also – Gregory, D. (2018) *Skittled Out: The collapse and revival of England's social infrastructure*. London, Local Trust

become, through incorporation, new groups which are looking to establish themselves as community anchor organisations for many years to come.

Some Big Local partnerships have commissioned activities, allowing them to shape the design of local service provision. For example, Radstock Big Local is attempting to influence local authority youth provision through commissioning a different approach to open access centre-based interventions, which are being co-designed, in part, with young people.

Taking Risks

In addition, most Big Local partnerships were new to grant making and commissioning, and some have taken risks. Some funded or commissioned activities have not always had the impact desired. Even though a Big Local partnership might have been clear about the outcomes it sought from a commissioned service, there are examples of commissioned organisations just delivering their conventional services and treating the commission like a grant. This has not been helped where the commissioner, which in effect is the LTO, has failed to take action in support of their Big Local partnership's aspirations. The following conversation between four partnership members - see Box 1 - illustrates how things can go wrong but also the learning gained from a disappointing commissioning exercise.

Box 1: A Big Local conversation (Discussion between partnership members and paid worker; R = respondent)

Learning through the challenges of commissioning services

R1: *'We aren't really getting outcomes. We're getting figures and facts, but what's really changing?'*

R2: *'I think there was an issue that they didn't really make any effort to embed themselves into the community.'*

R3: *'They just came and ran a service.'*

R2: *'.... they ran the service as they would run the service in their own community.They expected people to come to them, but they didn't get themselves embedded into the community, and I think that's why they never really established properly. And they were also very reluctant to promote what they did. ... You know, if you're just there, you're just getting the money... And I think they viewed the funding as a grant.'*

.... we call them delivery partners, and the expectation is that whoever you appoint work with you to develop something for [names Big Local area], but I think they never really would grasp that,.... that it's working together. So, when you said, "Well, we want to shape the service like that," and they would just come back and go, "Oh, no, no, we don't do that." So, I think the relationship was never quite there.'

R1: *'But we've learnt, as well. We've learnt not just how to handle them, if you like, but work with them, also be quite clear, or clearer, on what we wanted. Whereas I think we were a little bit ..., "They're the professionals, they're providing the service," and that probably was a- not a mistake, because we didn't know any better.'*

R4; *'That's part of Big Local, though, isn't it? It's learning for not just the community, but it's learning for us as partners, as well, and, you know, it doesn't matter what our backgrounds have been, we have had quite a steep learning curve here.'*

R4: *'it was [names LTO] who seemed to be telling them what it was we wanted them to do, rather than us. ...*

R2: *'So, they would go straight to [names LTO] when they had questions, and the partnership, or Big Local, were, sort of, really out of the picture altogether'*

R2: [names LTO] *"Well, they're delivering the service. What's wrong with it?" and we were, sort of, trying to say, "Yes, but it's not really meeting the community's expectations." We had to fight hard to make it a triangle rather than a straight one-two relationship.'*

This example provides a rich demonstration of both the challenges of organising and commissioning services to improve a local community, but also of the learning through practice that can arise, albeit in difficult circumstances. It highlights issues of different interests, local commitment, the role of 'external' providers, and the power relationships between 'professionals' and 'residents'. Big Local provides an environment in which learning by experience can take place which cuts across many of these issues.

Addressing Gaps

A note of caution, however, is required in assessing change for groups and organisations. Not all those community-based projects supported by Big Local areas have grown and developed – or even survived. Big Local partnerships have been working against the tide, particularly in terms of youth work and play provision, where local authority cuts have meant, for example, that Big Local partner and delivery agencies have lost substantial mainstream funding and have had to reduce services – or close. Community-based services such as libraries, have also disappeared. This reflects the broader context of austerity measures and reductions in local authority budgets in which Big Local has evolved, such that: *'£1 million can only go so far'* (Big Local: worker interview).

2.4 Broader community change

In addition to changes for individuals and groups in Big Local areas – there is also evidence of change for the wider community. This is most evident in relation to physical and environmental changes, and with community hubs. But it is also traceable in less tangible aspects of change, such as feelings and aspirations, and in terms of coordinating activities at community level.

Physical and environmental changes

The most visible dimension of change covers physical and environmental change such as providing hanging baskets and planters (Grassland Hasmoor, Revoe and

Whitley Bay) at one level, to enhancements of local facilities and onto large scale capital projects. Examples include:

- **Play and leisure facilities:** Growing Together has funded the installation of several small play areas and outdoor gym sites, and Westfield is funding a small play area next to its community centre, whilst Barrowcliff prioritised a third of its million for a brand new larger scale [play park](#):

‘People had asked for it for years through various funding streams and never got it and, kind of, lost faith in all programmes like this, so we thought, “Well, let’s start off on the right foot, show people this is what Big Local can do. You’ve asked for this, we can do it,” and, you know, it turned out good for us’.
(Big Local Worker)

- **Environmental improvements:** ranging from smaller scale initiatives such as the 147 trees planted by Bountagu Big Local to much larger and more costly interventions. Whitley Bay Big Local has contributed to improving the appearance of the town through influencing the council’s [seafront regeneration](#) programme (and mentioned in a House of Lords [debate](#)). Using feedback from early consultations, Big Local created a masterplan that included reviving design features that residents valued, such as the shape and a particular colour of street furniture. Big Local covered the costs of the first paint mix and the first bollard cast and these are now in situ across the town. Similarly, *‘doing something about the lakes’* in [Swanhaven Park](#) (which had been neglected and were in a poor state of maintenance) was an early vision for Growing Together. With Big Local time and money Growing Together co-ordinated a partnership of agencies to fund an effective clean-up operation which has brought wildlife back into the area and created a vastly more pleasant and useable environment for local residents.
- **Investment in local services:** Following lobbying by Ambition Lawrence Weston and the wider community, a national supermarket chain has opened in the Lawrence Weston community, as well as a competition standard BMX track. There have also been changes in the housing stock, [supported by Ambition Lawrence Weston](#), with the development of environmentally friendly passive homes and plans for community-led and co-operative housing.

Community hubs

The role of community hubs

Some Big Locals offer community activities from existing community centres (e.g. Three Parishes and Catton Grove) but the majority of the 15 Big Local areas in Our Bigger Story have invested in the creation of community hubs as a local focal point for activities, meetings and organising. These hubs take a variety of forms:

- a converted school caretaker’s building will house the planned hub in [Birchfield](#), subject to planning permission and securing capital funding
- Growing Together opened a community space in a converted pub on one of its estates

- In Lawrence Weston the aim is to provide a range of co-located services – including a G.P. practice and pre-school provision
- [Northfleet Central](#) (opened in the [Autumn of 2017](#)) has revitalised a virtually unused old Methodist Chapel through strengthening existing groups locally and building new sets of activities
- Revoe, which already has a small caretaker's house on the estate, has taken on management of a former community church to work with larger groups, including youth groups
- Westfield is responsible for the management of a pub turned council youth centre turned Big Local community centre.
- Whitley Bay has taken on the lease of a very large mothballed job centre and is looking to secure funds to buy the property.

Meanwhile, Grassland Hasmoor Big local has been operating out of temporary premises in each of its two villages whilst it continues to work on securing more appropriate community-based space in two identified buildings, and Ramsey Million has a partnership with the cricket club for extensive expansion and refurbishment work with a planned opening date in 2021.

In two other areas, hopes for community hubs have been dashed, at least temporarily. In Bountagu Big Local, the community hub was lost when the partnership separated from its LTO (the LTO held the lease) though it hopes to find a space for something similar in the future. Catton Grove Big Local took on an old police 'box', and commissioned an organisation to run services from it. However, after three years, Big Local has not seen the outcomes it hoped for and has pulled the plug on the commission and handed the building back (it still runs activities from a local community centre).

The impact of community hubs

Community hubs raise local awareness about Big Local itself by providing a **visible presence** in, and a focal point for, the wider community. As such they are significant in engaging people as volunteers and supporting greater community activity. Community hubs do have an impact at various levels. For, **vulnerable or isolated adults**, they provide a safe space to meet, make friends and combat social isolation.

'We live in the same street but see each more here. It used to be that your neighbours were like your extended family ... and now it's not quite like that. That's why places like this are important because you build up relationships with people you meet on a regular basis.' (Hub user; See [Growing Together Brookside Community Hub film](#))

For groups, they enable new (as well as more) activities to emerge or sustain pre-existing activities where often long-established meeting facilities are disappearing. Evaluation feedback from groups accessing community hubs that have been developed, or supported, by Big Local partnerships illustrates that they are seen as an invaluable resource in terms of free or affordable accommodation for community groups/enterprises over a period in which such facilities have been closed – or hire charges increased to levels unaffordable for new and emerging groups.

'I'm not a local but what has impressed me is all the work that is happening in the community.... I've never come into this building [community hub] when there is not something happening. There is a sense of activities leading to action.' (Local Authority Arts Worker)

They provide a neutral space for bringing different people and groups together and build **cohesion** in communities where there have been tensions or the estates within a Big Local area have tended to maintain separate identities.

Further, they provide a base for essential **community services** provided by other agencies and facilitate local access to those services i.e. they reduce the need to travel very far. They can also therefore play a **strategic role** within the community, such as the proposed integrated hub in Lawrence Weston where co-located health, family and community services are integral to the delivery of the Neighbourhood Plan.

Sustaining community hubs

In most areas, then, creating or sustaining a community hub has been one of the key priorities for communities and partnerships. This has wider resonances with the 150 Big Local areas more generally and Local Trust's interest in the [sustainability of such shared spaces](#)⁶. Further, as Big Local areas move into legacy planning and spending up, some hubs have the potential to be the base for community anchor organisations⁷ in the future - building on the investment of Big Local areas.

Sustaining financially viable community hubs is, however, a challenge in the current economic climate. What may be seen as a resource and something in which it is important to invest time, energy and money could become a liability in the future – particularly when existing revenue streams to support ongoing activity become increasingly competitive and difficult to access. These implications are not lost on Big Locals, as partnership members in one area pointed out in the conversation in Box 2.

Box 2. A Big Local conversation (Discussion between partnership members.

R = respondent)

The dilemmas of developing a community hub

R1: *'I almost daren't enjoy it. I just kind of go, "What if we all have to pack it all up again?'*

R2: *'I'm cautious that we start talking about the building right away, but the Big Local is more than the building, like, if this place is empty, it could still have our name on it, but that doesn't make it the Big Local.'*

R1: *'We haven't had a caretaker of the buildings, so it has been all hands on deck, so I guess both [names workers] have been quite diverted and...fabulous volunteers as well, into running a building, and that's a big job. It doesn't need the skills that both of*

⁶ See for example, Trup, N., Carrington, D. and Wyler, S. (2019) *Community Hubs; Understanding survival and success*. London, Local Trust <https://localtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Community-Hubs-Report.pdf>

⁷ For a broader view of the role of anchor organisations in local economies see <https://cles.org.uk/publications/community-wealth-building-through-anchor-institutions/>

them have got, because they've got amazing other skills, but they couldn't use those skills while the building needed the electricity sorted.

R1: *There's also just more costs associated with the running of this building... '*

R3: *'So there's issues....around how we've gone from being a tenant to effectively, if we do purchase, we're going to be a landlord, and how we can be sustainable and how much income can we make by selling space. How near is it approaching a breakeven point to be able to pay for the time of [names paid workers]... and pay all the bills and all the other overheads?'*

Different types of change

Affecting 'soft' change in communities

It is relatively easy for residents and Big Local partnership members to point to the physical changes happening in Big Local areas, and for the evaluation to document these. However, there is more to Big Local than visible change in communities:

'The Big Local legacy? I want it to be about more than bricks and mortar. I want it to be about aspirations and how people feel – about themselves and their community' [Big Local chair]

It is those critical intangible aspects of Big Local, covering aspirations and how people feel about their area, that are harder to identify, demonstrate and capture visually. Yet some of this is evident in the stories of individual change recorded earlier in this section – in words and video links. It is also possible to evidence other forms of change – change in communities' narratives about themselves, how others view them, and how, even within a hyper-local area, different communities might relate to each other. People talk about feeling a change in the area in terms of the nebulous but important sense of 'community spirit', and of how people's expectations have risen:

'When we did a little survey, people just said – the general public said that they felt there was more of a community spirit in the town' (Big Local worker)

'I feel that we're at a point now where people don't actually remember us not having it. ... it's just part of the norm when they talk about it, whereas when we started this all those years ago and everyone was moaning that they didn't have it, now they have it'. (Partnership member talking about youth provision).

The following conversation between two partnership members in Box 3 below amplifies this point.

Box 3: A Big Local conversation (Discussion between partnership members; R = respondent)
Intangible change

R1: *'I often think it's really quite difficult to measure the benefit we're having, you know, and you can't measure people'ssmiles on people's faces and yet we have*

the feeling that we are having a sort of benevolent influence on people and people feel more comfortable in their own area and maybe even more comfortable to talk to each other'

R2: 'I think more people are talking to each other now, not necessarily through [Big Local] but I'm seeing things going on and they don't feel so down now because we always feel like we're sort of a dumping ground and nothing happens for us and whatever. But I think they are seeing a bit of a difference that things are going to be happening'

A further 'spin off' from increased levels of activity has been a feeling that this has impacted on community cohesion locally. In three Big Locals - Growing Together, Northfleet and Hanwell - this involved encouraging greater connections between the estates that make up the Big Local area. For example, the creation and use of the community hub in Northfleet as a neutral space has brought people from four different communities together. There are also examples from more rural areas such as in the Three Parishes and Grassland Hasmoor Big Local areas. In the Three Parishes of St. Martins, Gabowen and Weston Rhyn there is much more networking between the villages and even the three parish councils have been brought together by Big Local. Grassland Hasmoor Big Local struggled from the start with trying to get residents from the two areas, Hasland in Chesterfield and Grassmoor in North East Derbyshire, to see Big Local as 'one' area, an issue not helped by the fact that they fall under two different local authorities with different styles and mind-sets: *'you can't underestimate the power of that politics'*. But the partnership feels this is changing and notes that *'don't think we can distinguish, generally speaking, at partnership meetings, the two communities any more'*.

Co-ordinating change

As Our Bigger Story shows, Big Local involves using locally allocated resources and expertise, with support, to enable things to happen in making communities better places in which to live. This is repeatedly borne out in other evaluations and reports on Big Local in practice. But it isn't the only impact of Big Local. There is evidence that not only is 'more happening' but that Big Local is playing a key role in co-ordinating activities in ways which enhance the potential impact of individual activities and projects. This indirect convening and coordinating power not only helps secure more impactful existing activities, it also offers the prospect of generating lasting change, by building and reconfiguring relationships between different groups, stakeholders and organisations. As one elected member in a Big Local area put it:

'Bringing people together is what it's all about....Big Local is a focal point for the community - funding some fantastic initiatives such as the community hub but also outreach... It's about capturing voice and bringing a focus.'

In the Three Parishes this has involved micro-social enterprises collaborating and circulating skills, knowledge and money around and within the community: *'groups and, indeed, the three parishes, are less likely to compete with each other'* (Partnership member). Catton Grove Big Local is proud of the fact that for a very small financial investment, they can bring people together round the table for lunch and discussion: *'I think one of the things that we have done successfully is pull*

together various professional groupspeople are communicating, like the detached workers, youth workers and YMCA together. Northfleet provides an example of informal networking to avoid competition and duplication:

'We've developed a loose network of arts organisations in the area to get them working together rather than accidentally crashing into each other. There's been silos in the past with lots of things going on but people not knowing what they were and the Big Local has been very much a part of that.' (Local Authority Arts Worker)

Similar arts-based networks are evolving in Revoe, and Ramsey Million achieved heritage outcomes in part through bringing together the different small heritage groups and encouraging them to work better together.

Strategic change

Bringing together community groups and frontline workers is one thing; co-ordinating strategic partners and influencing them is another, but arguably of greater and lasting potential significance. There are many examples of this more 'strategic' co-ordination, such as:

- The 'Lakes' project in Northampton, where Growing Together initiated joint working between Big Local, the Environment Agency and the local authority to make the project happen,
- A Grassland Hasmoor Big Local partnership member and key player in its 'Green and Open Spaces' working group managed to get the four different authorities together who has hitherto been resisting action:

'He got them round the table, and they then looked at each other and thought, "We're going to be called out here" And they started to deliver. Now that's pretty good.' (Partnership member).

- Whitley Bay has for many years co-ordinated regular strategic partners meetings involving the police, the local authority and businesses This has contributed to joint working to regenerate the town.

In a number of areas, six to seven years of experience in managing Big Local and the accompanying resources has given partnerships a growing confidence to challenge decisions which impact on the locality and try to affect wider strategic change. For some, leading on the neighbourhood plan, or campaigning has *'given us seat at the table'* (OBS diary keeper). In Ramsey this has involved challenging cuts to rural bus services; in Lawrence Weston and in the Growing Together area, objections have been raised to new housing developments which do not align with the Neighbourhood Plan.

In many Big Local areas, a common description of the past has been that *'this was a forgotten area' but now 'we are no longer forgotten'*. They [usually the Local Authority] *know that we are here and that we are here to stay'* (Partnership member interview). Indeed, in a number of areas, though not all, Big Local had, in the view of

external agencies, *'become a focal point for the community, giving the community a voice'* (Elected Member).

Linked to this is work to change the external image of the community. In Ramsey, this has meant investment in local heritage to build tourism which, in turn, can enhance local economies. In Blackpool it has involved Revolve Big Local working towards improvements in [community safety and the physical condition](#) of the main thoroughfare which links major new housing developments with the town centre and new leisure facilities:

'We must be doing something right. Things are changing. A few years ago there were vacant properties that [the housing association] found hard to let. Now there is a waiting list.' (Big Local partner).

However, influence over 'higher level' change is uneven across Big Local areas. Although there are several examples of how Big Locals have changed the relationship with strategic partners for the better, some areas are more inwardly focused – prioritising what they can change *within* the area whilst there are a range of larger policy and related changes (ranging from major capital developments to the roll out of Universal Credit) which are having more negative impacts on community life. This issue of the relationship of Big Local with those 'high level' shifts – both locally and nationally – is further addressed in section 4.

3 How change happens

'Big Local is about small steps.....but small steps can make a big difference in people's lives' (Big Local partnership member).

Section 2 has explored and detailed the nature of change at different levels associated with Big Local. But what are the factors which generate change, and what are the challenges of seeking to bring about change? This section focuses on **strategies for change** - *who* helps deliver change and *what* helps deliver change.

3.1 Who helps deliver change?

As Big Local has evolved, there has been a growing recognition that the partnership is an important starting point for activity, but cannot achieve things on its own:

'The partnership cannot do it all. We would all have burnt out by now. We have to be enablers rather than doers' (Big Local partnership member).

One way of enabling others is a simple sharing of the workload, but there are a variety of approaches.

Partnership members

First, individual **Big Local partnership members** are often involved in delivering aspects of the partnership's plans. This includes, for example, organising major events (sometimes alongside paid staff) such as the Three Parishes' ['Have a Go' Day and local galas](#) or regular activities such as the Grassland Hasmoor [Pit Stop Diner](#), and community cafes and 'knit and natter' groups in other areas. In addition, individual partnership members:

- may play a 'scrutiny' role regarding Big Local grants and commissions,
- may be very active volunteers with community groups connected with Big Local, and
- where they are also elected members on town, parish, district or unitary councils, can act as conduits between Big Local and the various layers of local government – rather than, or as well as, personally delivering activities.

Volunteers and community activists

Second, some Big Locals have **active volunteers** who are close to the partnership but not members of it. This is the case in Bountagu Big Local where residents deliver, for example, a weekly coffee morning and attend and contribute to partnership meetings but have made a conscious decision not to 'sit' on the partnership. Grassland Hasmoor Big Local has an army of people beyond the partnership who deliver change through a wide range of working groups.

Paid workers

Third, Big Local **paid workers** play a significant role in making things happen. Broadly this includes:

- paid staff with substantive posts who are delegated by the partnership to carry out the day to day delivery and sometimes also have an oversight role. Such roles may be described as managers, community development workers, communications and administrative staff, and specialist workers, for example, providing youth work in Hanwell, or arts-based activities in Northfleet,
- people taken on as sessional staff e.g. in youth provision, or on a one-off basis as in Ramsey where a resident was hired on a short-term contract to facilitate CREATE-Fest, Ramsey's free music festival.
- consultancy staff – people hired to carry out pieces of strategic development as with Grassland Hasmoor Big Local, (researching options for capital buildings investments)

Within these three approaches though, there is still some difference in the extent to which partnerships rely on workers to make change happen, and the extent to which decision-making powers are delegated. And there is recognition within partnerships that delegating everything to workers is not sustainable as Big Local funding comes to an end. Alongside this it is worth noting that Big Local workers (even when these are also local residents) can shift power relationships within and around the partnership.

Ownership of the Big Local vision and the process of change came to the fore in Bountagu when there was a conflict between some partnership members and paid staff. The fall out resulted in some soul searching and a desire to rebuild Bountagu Big local. This still includes a role for paid staff but with a much more explicit resident-led approach as described in a partnership discussion in Box 4.

Box 4: A Big Local conversation (Discussion between partnership members , Big Local Rep and LTO; R = respondent)

Worker-led or resident-led?

R1: *'We relied too much on our manager who – I mean, who was very ambitious for us and had some very good ideas, but who tended to come along and say, 'This is what you are doing'. It's our fault for not telling, you know, 'We will make the decisions and we will tell you what we want done,' but I think that's a bit of learning, you know, we now have a better idea of what our role is and what we want staff to do for us.'*

R2: *'it's very easy, you see it in many Big Local areas where over time it becomes worker-led rather than resident-led because I think, you know, there is that tendency to sit back, we're volunteers, we only have so much time, they're paid, they have all of this time, so I think it just happens gradually over time without you often noticing it until it becomes an issue.'*

R3: *'... this partnership is very connected to its plan and very involved in the design of the plan, and I think if you own the design of that then your decision-making*

around how you take that forward, it makes a lot of difference.'

This issue of power dynamics is further addressed further in section 4.

Locally Trusted Organisations

Finally, there is the **LTO**, where the role in delivering change varies considerably. In Barrowcliff the LTO is a credit union and performs a straightforward banking role. In contrast, in Ramsey the LTO operates as an additional delivery arm as a Neighbourhood Trust. Sometimes the LTO also brings an overarching strategic vision as in the case of Ambition Lawrence Weston. In Hanwell, day to day delivery has been delegated to the LTO with a strategic steer not only from Big Local but also from other stakeholders.

Locally Trusted Organisations can also of course hinder the delivery of change. There are examples of LTOs not paying bills on time, failing to set up appropriate contracts and commissions, and failing to understand the resident-led ethos of Big Local. These have all undermined change as envisioned by partnerships.

As the Big local programme evolves, **'arms-length' delivery organisations** are being established – where the partnership provides oversight of the Big Local plan but day to day delivery is increasingly contracted out to a newly established body such as a Community Interest Company or Charitable Incorporated Organisation (for example, Radstock), or to the Big Local legacy body (as is the case with Growing Together).

3.2 What helps generate change?

Big Local involves a significant financial allocation for implementing the plans of each partnership. The way the funding is used can be an important catalyst for creating and delivering change, but other factors come into play as well, such as support, motivations, energy and different ways of working.

Resident-led

Local Trust emphasises residents being in control as the experts about where they live. This is reinforced by a Big Local worker commenting on a meeting to discuss council plans for the area:

[I thought, oh no] 'they're going through it line by line. But they were going through it line by line because they knew the place line by line.'

As discussed in [Big Local: Reflections on 'resident led' change \(2019\)](#), resident led as a concept is not straightforward. Residents have questioned who identifies as a resident, who 'qualifies' as a resident, and debated notions of the 'authentic' resident and what 'getting it right' looks like. However, one resident described Big Local as 'a catalyst' for further resident led development: *'...a start to help us move on'*, and enablers of change have been identified as the financial leverage, a credible resident

led structure, opportunities to develop knowledge, skills and community leadership, a physical space to meet, national connections and networks, and time.

Capacity building support to create change

Big Local is testing whether *'long term funding and support to build capacity gives residents in hyper local areas agency to take decisions and to act to create positive and lasting change'*. The support element is just as significant in this proposition as the funding. Whether this is understood as capacity building, which enables groups and organisations to 'do more', or is more about the concept of building capabilities – being able to 'do things better' (Macmillan *et al* 2014)⁸, it takes place at both the local and the national levels.

At the local level, partnership members, Big Local or other locally based paid workers may be responsible for the generation of 'agency', by which we mean empowerment, or an ability to make things happen, individually, or more commonly as a collective. Whilst there are examples of active residents taking on the role of building agency, in most places it tends to be the responsibility of paid staff, for example by encouraging small and emerging groups to evolve and work towards a sustainable independence, perhaps though building a volunteer base, or diversifying funding as in Three Parishes and [networks for change](#) film.

At the national level, Local Trust has put in place easily accessible support and advice through its Reps structure, through regional and national peer based networks and events, and through focussed support from partner organisations, most recently through the Community Leadership Academy. Most people who take up these opportunities (who by and large are partnership members) report that they enjoy meeting others and find them useful. However, is it always the same few who participate from each Big Local? To what extent does the networking support reach beyond furthering the capacity /capabilities of those who already have some? And how meaningful is peer support for those who feel they are struggling with making change whilst others are steaming ahead? There is some evidence that some Big Local partnership members are hesitant to participate in events where others are confidently boasting about their successes; *'it makes us feel worse'*.

Funding as a change mechanism

The enabling role of funding plays out in several different ways.

Grants and loans have been used across all Big Local areas to fund activities which meet the stated objectives of the partnership. As described in section 2, small grants and loans are used to support individuals, one off events and ongoing activities. Larger grants are often used to deliver specific services, such as welfare benefits and money advice (Three Parishes and Westfield), community transport (Hanwell), or developing amenities. Examples here include the development of a community shop

⁸ Macmillan, R., Ellis Paine, A., with Kara, H. Dayson, C. Sanderson, E. and Wells, P. (2014) *Building capabilities in the voluntary sector: What the evidence tells us*. Birmingham, Third Sector Research Centre

and sustaining a community hub (Lawrence Weston) or providing free start up space for emerging community groups (Northfleet)⁹ and for the development of managed business and community space at Gabowen Station in the Three Parishes.

Commissioning is somewhat rarer – certainly in terms of drawing up contractual specifications and / or going through a tendering process – than grant making. This kind of approach is currently being taken in [Radstock and Westfield](#) and has happened already in Revoe, Catton Grove, Growing Together, Three Parishes, Ramsey, Grassland Hasmoor and Lawrence Weston.

In a couple of the case study areas, the partnerships decided that the quality of the commissioned service was insufficient, and the contracts were brought to a close (see Box 1). In Revoe, youth work was brought ‘in house’ through the employment of a Big Local worker. Resident partnership members expressed the view that the experience had (after a difficult process) increased their confidence as they had effectively challenged an established, professional, agency. There may well be further valuable learning from Big Local areas around the commissioning process in the future – given Local Trust and New Local Government Network interest in [community commissioning](#) of services¹⁰.

Additional and matched funding has enabled several Big Locals to do a lot more than the £1 million would allow. Since 2012, Lawrence Weston Big Local and its LTO, Ambition Lawrence Weston, for example, have attracted over £2 million pounds from other sources, mainly connected to housing and energy initiatives but also for the community hub. This has come from small investments but mainly from strategic funding pots such as the Coastal Communities Fund, Homes England and the National Lottery Community Fund’s Reaching Communities programme. Likewise, Growing Together ensured funding for the lakes project from the Environment Agency, the borough council and a charitable foundation, and secured money from Pocket Parks Plus (MHCLG) to create play provision in an area adjacent to, but not part of, the Big Local boundary. Finally, Ramsey Million has worked with its LTO to bring different lottery funds, local authority monies and small grants into Ramsey to help deliver residents objectives:

‘Without Big Local, say from the outside, I don’t think our [LTO] would be where it is today and ... has just, within the last few months, got £250,000 from the Big Lottery Community Fund to take forward their core work and they are the same sort of things that Big Local would fund’ (Partnership member).

These examples illustrate how the initial Big Local money has leveraged other resources and contributed to further ambition and enterprise.

⁹ For more detailed information on the range of activities supported by Big Local grants visit the [case studies section](#) of the Our Bigger Story website.

¹⁰ See Lent, A., Studdert, J. and Walker, T. (2019) *Community Commissioning Shaping Public Services Through People Power*. London, New Local Government Network/Local Trust

The confidence that has come from having some money to put on the table has helped to generate closer, and more equal relationships with other stakeholders and potential funders. This is demonstrated by the Grassland Hasmoor Green and Open Spaces Working Group, one of the original Big Local working groups which has now formed as a separate constituted group to improve and develop green space in our community. Its mission was and remains to promote and develop all the public green spaces in and between Hasland and Grassmoor and to ensure that the two communities were in a position to influence and determine how the limited available external funding was to be used. Table 1 below indicates the range of activities to which Grassland Hasmoor Big Local has contributed, through the Green and Open Spaces Working Group, in order to bring other stakeholders and funding together to make for a better place in which to live.

Table 1: Leveraging resources in Grassland Hasmoor Big Local
Report from Green and Open Spaces Working Group

Working with DCC we successfully negotiated for a footpath / cycle route to be constructed ... a key route between Hasland and Grassmoor

Total cost to date	£ 147,805
GHBL Contribution	£ 5,312
Match Funding	£142,493

Our involvement as stakeholders in the £15million funding for improvements along the A61 has seen a cycle route from the Centre of Chesterfield to Hasland being prioritised

Total cost to date	£195,000
GHBL contribution	£ 0
External benefit	£195,000

Working with the DCC Countryside Service we have over last two years seen improvements to the value of £31,500 to date with a contribution of only £250 from the GHBL. Further improvements are in negotiation at this time.

Total cost to date	£31,543
GHBL contribution	£ 250
Match funding	£31,293

We created a new petanque club in Eastwood Park, Hasland ... With an initial grant from GHBL of £12,000 and £4,200 from UnLtd we were able to construct a playing area and later adding a substantial shelter.

Total Cost to date	£21,800
GHBL Contribution	£12,500
Match Funding	£ 9,300

Working with the Community Facilities Working Group we have supported the development of a Pocket Park in Hasland. The scheme is in line with developing our green and open spaces for greater resident and community benefit.

Total cost to date	£396,148
GHBL Contribution to date	£ 18,062
Match / external funding	£378,086

Further, some Big Local areas are taking a long-term investment view. For example, Lawrence Weston has invested in a 'greener' area through a solar farm and wind energy turbines which will generate funds to invest locally beyond the life of Big Local monies.

Money can help make things happen. It can purchase things – dedicated time, equipment and facilities – but its role as a mechanism for generating change in Big Local is so much more than this. It can combine with other resources, and thus is involved in leveraging collaborative relationships and partnerships. However, it also has symbolic value, raising the profile and status of Big Local, both amongst residents and key stakeholders and influential decision makers. It can raise confidence, open doors and help realise plans for local initiatives.

Energies and motivators for change

Strategies for stimulating activity and generating change may be important – but what underpins this? After all, creating community led change at the best of times is hard enough, but after 10 years of austerity the challenge might be thought to be insurmountable. In an attempt to understand this, Our Bigger Story has explored, through individual interviews, focus groups and reflective diaries, the factors which facilitate change making at the hyper-local level. What the analysis reveals is the importance of the energy and motivation sustaining engagement, and the emotional commitment that underpins this. Overwhelmingly, there is an emotional rationale to being active and involved – simply *'I love where I live'* as one participant put it.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the increasing complexity of society (extending even to the relatively small geographies of Big Local areas) a sense of place, a sense of belonging, and the need to invest physical and emotional energy in place through social connections is central¹¹.

Within this sense of place, [motivations may vary](#) (see Revoe film) in terms of what drives Big Local partnership members and other local actors, but the analysis suggests complex interactions between different kinds of motivation:

- **Future generations** – *'My children live in the area and I'm involved with children (through the local school) so I am passionate about it...also I've made a lot of friends and the fact that we are doing things and talking to people about how we can improve things...you want to know your children have a future'* (Partnership member and locally elected member)
- **Political beliefs** – *'We should not be pulling up the drawbridge. We should be throwing out life jackets...I've seen there are injustices and I want my kids to*

¹¹ Exploring this further is beyond the scope of the current evaluation. However, there is interesting work happening in Scotland which relates such concepts of social relationships with broader social policy – see Anderson, S. and Brownlie, J. (2019) *Public policy and the infrastructure of kindness in Scotland*. Dunfermline, Carnegie Trust <https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/public-policy-and-the-infrastructure-of-kindness-in-scotland/>

grow up in a community that is better than the one we inherited' (Big Local partnership member and locally elected member)

- **Lack of trust in others** – *'I wanted to know where the money was going. So, I thought, 'I'm going to go and find out'. And that's what made me come.'* (Big Local partnership member)
- **Anger** – *'at what they (names external agencies) are doing to us. I love (names Big Local area) and I want to make sure that some of the promises they have made are going to be kept.'* (Big Local partnership member)
- **Self interest** – a sense that *'I want my community to be even better' and / or without that investment of time and energy, my/our own quality of life may deteriorate and that the Big Local approach has the potential to deliver and bring about change: 'And, that was our biggest problem when we started. We knew that promises had been made in the past by different agendas and nothing had happened'* (Big Local worker)
- **The social dimension** – is critical. Partnership members talked of the importance of friendships made and new social networks: *'There's something in sharing a cup of tea and sharing food..... I think it's underestimated, that, because that's about enjoyment, being part of the partnership should be an addition, like, a, kind of, positive addition to your life. It shouldn't be something that's a drain or something that you're dreading.'* (Big Local partnership member).
- **A sense of civic duty** - *'So, I suppose it was like, I was a bog-standard resident, things went on around and nothing upset me greatly, nothing thrilled me greatly. That was it, I lived...But, as I say, there was always a feeling that really I ought to be contributing something,....I think it is called public service, and I am a pompous old ***, but that is why.'* (Partnership member).

Keeping going

An emotional commitment, then – a 'passion about place' - is a prime motivator for involvement with Big Local. This could be either as partnership members or local community groups delivering against Big Local plans. What, however, keeps people going and sustains it? After all, participants in individual and focus group interviews talked about the long-term nature of the programme:

'There's something about sticking power, isn't there? About being around and knowing the background, knowing the journey' (Partnership member)

'You have to be in for the long haul. You know you have to refresh [the partnership] with new members – but that can be hard.' (Partnership member)

'After six or seven years, yes you do get tired. Worn down at times....but you have to find the energy and recharge the batteries.' (Partnership member)

However, for all of the above, a common theme amongst those interviewed (both partnership members and workers) was that levels of activity themselves keep people going, in what looks like a virtuous self-reinforcing circle:

'Seeing and being part of all the activities that are happening – and what people tell you about them – that is what keeps you going.' (Partnership member)

This is reinforced quite strongly by a Big Local worker:

'There are lots of things going on. And, that means it is interesting when people come to the meetings, so they come, they will tell their friends, and we have picked up a couple of new partnership members just because people are interested, we haven't dragged them here, They have come along and said, 'Please can I join the partnership?' because there is loads of stuff going on. So, you know there is a clear correlation, once the activities stop and you lose profile, people don't come to the partnership because they want to be involved.....'

Feeling valued also helps to keep people going. Some partnership members have strong views and high expectations about the time they think people should commit and the skills that are required. And the evaluation has heard from residents who don't feel valued as much as those who bring particular expertise but live outside the area or are professionals. Many partnership members, however, are more accommodating, embracing the knowledge and experience brought by different people:

'[We have] a different mix of people but they all bring something different in whatever way that may be. Like you said, you've got people that are good at technical stuff, you've got people that are good with people, then you've got people that know the area, and different things like that, and some that are just quite wise, you know They're quite wise in what they come out with, you know. They've been about a while and, you know, know how things work and, you know, they do have valued opinions. I think you need them people, as well'.

Levels of energy do seem, however, to vary between and within Big Local partnerships. There were those that talked about consistent – but relatively low - levels of energy: *'people have busy lives and are fitting in [Big Local] around the day job, care and other commitments.'* (Big Local worker interview). Sustaining consistently high levels of energy was seen as problematic – or at least challenging. Energy, was frequently described as *'a roller coaster'* – with people needing time to *'dip out and recover'*, as described by one Big Local partnership member:

'I think it is fair to say that..... any type of partnership in [names Big Local area] will ebb and flow, it will go up and down. It will imitate a rollercoaster so to speak....A lot of people here are really passionate, so they might not always know the best way of doing it but they will go gung-ho, so if you are going to go all out and use all your energy, there needs to be periods of rest as well.....It is naïve of anyone, just because you are funded, it doesn't mean

that you can carry on really consistently. You have to have rest periods. This is people that just live in a place and want to change a place. They are not people that are paid on a salary to not care about their own emotional wellbeing and mental health, so you have to balance out kind of having some switch-off time and respect the need for that. So, I think that up and down is the best model because it takes into account that you are working with people, not machines’.

Clearly, this is one of the strengths of the Big Local programme. It is long term and this enables people to move in and out and back in again to Big Local activities.

Changing attitudes and aspirations

Activity – and visible impact arising from it – can be powerful motivators, and it can sustain energy beyond an individual event, by engendering a shift in attitudes:

‘Where there was apathy, with everything happening, now there is hope’
(Partnership focus group – for more information see the [Revoe partnership film](#) on motivations and energy)

The converse is also true, such that it is sometimes hard to win round people who have good reason to be sceptical about another set of promises to improve the local area. Box 5 below highlights the reflections from a Big Local area about how small improvements can change mind-sets.

Box 5: A Big Local conversation (Discussion between partnership member and paid worker; R = respondent)
Changing mind-sets

R1: *‘... the apathy was, I think, is because there’d been over the years, there have been a lot of promises to do this, to do that, and never happened through one thing or another, and these things just didn’t happen, and then people just, you know, they think, ‘Well, oh, yeah, we’ve heard it all before. It’ll not happen. We’ll see. It won’t happen,’ you know, and now they’re beginning to see that, you know, maybe, they see small improvements and small changes and they notice them, and they think, ‘Well, do you know what, something is happening.’*

R2: *‘And, coming back from the consultation we asked the question, “Do you think you can change things in your area?” and it was quite a resounding, “No, we can’t change things in the area”. So, what we wanted to do initially was to deliver something solid that people could see, touch, and feel to give them the confidence back that, “Yeah, if we do come together and have a large, strong voice we can get things done”. So, we are hoping now, once these infrastructure projects are up and coming, that will give people a confidence to then reinvest their time again and their energy into supporting the small number of volunteers we have got at the moment, to make [names Big Local areas] an even better place.’*

Partnership members, however, made a distinction in terms of becoming a partnership member and being motivated and energised to deliver activities:

'People want to do things, not go to meetings, so how can we make those opportunities?' (Big Local partnership member).

In short, there is a virtuous circle between activity and sustained motivation and engagement.

Agency to influence change

A key factor in building and sustaining motivation and energy is the extent to which people feel they have some power and influence (or, in terms of the Big Local hypothesis, agency), and can see its effect. Five of the 15 case study areas are confident about how they have influenced strategic change and consequently made their areas better places to live.

In **Lawrence Weston**, a Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) has enabled Big Local – as a key player in the plan process – to challenge planning applications which do not conform to its goals:

'We have delivered a Neighbourhood Development Plan which gives us a lot more standing up and a lot more power and a lot more voice. So, perhaps we have gone about it in a way where we don't need everyone to come out on street corners with placards bemoaning what is wrong and what is right, because we have got processes and policies in place to make sure that their views are fair.' (Big Local worker)

Members of the partnership talked about having *'a more active role ... and a big plan'* and that *'things are changing'*. Examples include a bus route that the bus company initially refused but is now running; the supermarket that now exists in the face of inaction by the council; other successful projects such as the community led housing scheme and the BMX track. This is all, according to one participant:

'... concrete evidence of the residents coming together and changing their ways, standing up and demanding what the residents need and want' (Big Local partnership member)

And importantly, this confidence has spread to the wider community:

'... we have facilitated and supported residents to deliver on their own without Big Local or Ambition Lawrence Weston...and that was a group of residents wanted to approve a local play park, so we signposted, and we supported, and with some funding they have now gone on to raise £100,000 and they will be overseeing the play park. So, we are really conscious that the residents shouldn't become too dependent on us but trying to empower residents to deliver what it is they want for themselves' (Big Local worker).

Growing Together Big Local also has an interdependent relationship with the Neighbourhood Plan. Residents have used the Plan to successfully challenge

decisions around a new housing development. In discussing what has made a difference, focus group participants (partnership members and Growing Together Northampton staff) suggested that the Neighbourhood Plan has meant that the council needs to take them more seriously, that the Big Local process and its money, alongside changes in the council, have enabled long term changes like the Lakes project to come into being:

'... it is their property at the end of the day, but I don't think without our input, nothing would have been done about it and they would have just dried up and it would have just been wasteland'

'I think they recognise that we know the patch. I think perhaps it's less about impact and more about organisational knowledge. And they trust that knowledge to be true. So there's something about reputation and about what's gone before, and I think probably the Neighbourhood Plan is part of that, so that process of getting a significant amount of local people involved in what isn't traditionally a terribly popular or interesting area' (Big Local partnership member)

However, there are different views on this and a recognition that residents' wants have fit with the agenda of the council:

'[The council is] not thinking, "Oh, these people are in touch with their community," [It is] thinking, ... "This is a no-brainer for us. They're our Lakes, we have to do something, we've got an opportunity to do it now in co-ordination with a number of other organisations which will bring a lot of extra in, including a lot of money."I'm not convinced that the council as such have really noticed us, I don't think ... they would like to see any particular ..., shift in the balance of power.'

Whether or not the council recognises or acknowledges a shift in power, the physical and social infrastructure in the Growing Together area has changed in ways that imply a long-term legacy. Similarly, **Whitley Bay Big Local** can identify changes in the local area that it has influenced, in part through contributing to the council's agenda for seafront regeneration:

'The whole area has changed – it is a better place... not just better because of us, of course it's not, but it is a better place' (Big Local partnership member)

It would be wrong however, to assume this was just serendipity. Whitley Bay Big Local invested in a community consultation and a masterplan for the town, and initiated meetings with strategic partners very near the start of its journey.

Two other Big Locals that have steadily built agency through which to influence other key stakeholders and wider strategic developments are Ramsey Million and Grassland Hasmoor Big Local, and both have several tiers of local government through which to navigate.

At the most local level, **Ramsey Million** has gradually developed a working relationship with its Town Council – a body that was initially hostile to the very idea

that an independent group should lead Big Local, and that has had some influence over how the town council sees its role. This has involved bring people together, convening discussion, and changing the perspective of the Town Council, and is vividly described by focus group participants:

'I would say our greatest achievement is the way we have brought everybody together, to work together and particularly the working relationship with the town council, that is a massive achievement'

'It does seem to me that the town council are thinking differently about how they spend their money it's opened their eyes a bit, to what is going on in the town and what can be done in the town'

'... they actually see that they are really pivotal with regards decision-making and links in with both district and county councils, but they see that they don't have to do all the doing, that other people in the community, and particularly with Ramsey Million and Ramsey Neighbourhood Trusts, there are organisations there that can do a lot of the doing and have the experience and capacity to do that and that it's beneficial to both to work together'
(Big Local partnership members and a paid worker).

Two Ramsey Million partnership members are now Town Councillors and both credit their involvement with Ramsey Million as the stepping stone towards their new roles:

'I think being involved with first the Heritage Group and then Ramsey Million, my confidence has soared, absolutely soared, because I've been involved in things, spoken to people and – yes, I'm a totally different person'.

Beyond the town council, there are two, sometimes three¹² more tiers of authority. Ramsey Million has slowly but surely become recognised as a body that should be involved in decision making for the town: *'We are on the list'*. There is more partnership working, and as Ramsey Million itself says, this might not be an equal partnership and they often feel they have to do most of the work, but there are positive outcomes and *'sometimes things just need to be done, regardless of who does it or gets the credit!'*

Stories of residents improving outdoor spaces, growing community groups and building community infrastructure through **Grassland Hasmoor Big Local** have already been covered earlier in the report. Despite the development of good working relationships with some council officers and elected members at all levels, it doesn't think it will erode the blockages that hamper influence over the various councils that have authority in the area. Notwithstanding this, they do now feel that *'People would still be empowered to continue [to try]'*:

'Big Local has been the vehicle to put representatives of their communities to the forefront, and the council have listened because they've got the vehicle of Big Local'.

¹² District/Borough, County and in some areas regional/combined authorities.

'That's going to be the legacy thing, isn't it? the attitudes of people on the ground, but more particularly changing attitudes of people at the Town Hall, County Hall, whatever. That's the significant thing. And if, across the country, the 150 Big Locals, if they can achieve anything like that, that will be the miracle. And that would be the real, real benefit for this project' (Big Local partnership discussion).

In other Big Local areas, strategic level change may be less tangible than the creation of a comprehensive neighbourhood plan or investing resources to bring about a physical change to the locality. The shifts in power relationships may be more subtle but a common refrain from many Big Locals is of greater status and recognition of Big Local amongst other key decision-makers locally, as illustrated here:

'The relationship with [names council] Council has improved. That's simply down to people shouting that Big Local is still here. We are not going away and we want to work with you, not against you'

'The councillors now come to us – rather than us always having to go to them'

'People are sitting up and taking notice of us instead of shoving us to one side, "Oh, don't worry about them". But things are changing.
(Big Local partnership members)

Such claims are, however, difficult to verify and indeed, the interviews carried out by the evaluation team in 2018 indicated that in a few areas, some local stakeholders did not see, or value, agency in the community. Although the range of views was mixed, in some cases council officers and members were disparaging about Big Local, or saw Big Local policy and decision making as resting with the Big Local paid worker rather than residents (See [Outside In paper 2019](#)).

Partnership cultures

A lot of attention and emphasis in Big Local is placed on the partnership. Accordingly, it is worth reflecting on the extent to which a well-functioning, harmonious and productive partnership is always a relatively fragile accomplishment and an ongoing work in progress, as seen in this observation from a partnership member:

'You've got to have a good partnership. It only takes one person to be negative or there with their own agenda and it can totally ruin everything.' (Big Local partnership member)

Although not all are harmonious, a number of partnerships have spent considerable time and energy to 'get beyond' individual personalities either as leaders or disruptors. This has involved working towards more distributed leadership models – for example, devolving decision making to working groups.¹³ In others, where Big

¹³ For a more detailed discussion of leadership within Big Local partnerships see *Big Local: Reflections on Community Leadership (Paper Two)*
http://ourbiggerstory.com/2018_OBS_leadership_paper.pdf

Local areas are seeking to bring together different villages/townships/estates (Three Parishes, Radstock, Growing Together, Grassland Hasmoor, Northfleet or Hanwell), considerable time has been spent on creating the structures and practices which make for an equity of voice within the partnership. The aim is to ensure that no one locality (or its representatives) are dominant, and that there is a measure of equity in the distribution of Big Local resources.

Further, attention has been paid to how members relate to each other. The patient evolutionary approach of Big Local has facilitated the building of trust between people even where ideas and goals may not be completely shared. Partnership members, during interviews, frequently described others on the partnership as *'friends'* or *'like family'*, demonstrating care with and for each other in fulfilling their roles, as seen here:

'I think what is really nice about the partnership is everyone feels mindful about everybody, rather than they are sitting at a table with their personal needs of what they would like to see. I find the partnership very open and very practical, but not boring. I think they have vision, I think they have ambition, and I think they know what best suits the whole ecology of this ward, rather than, 'We already know that group, let's just keep helping that group'. They seem to be playing very fair, with, you know, the money that they can offer.'
(Big Local partnership member).

Building consensus, or at least the ability to disagree well, may seem a relatively minor development in terms of partnership working. It is, however, in the current febrile political climate, no mean achievement.

Reflections on enablers to change

In the OBS [Reflections on Community Leadership](#) paper, it was reported that partnership members valued collective and consensual forms of leadership. They saw Big Local as a mechanism for bringing people together, stimulating local activity, networking between different organisations, developing social enterprises and building their capacity for collaborative working. In addition to the support, funding, motivations and energy, and partnership cultures, Big Locals talked about the significance of patience and persistence, negotiation and mediation skills, and opportunities to reflect and learn.

The factors which generate change then, arise from the Local Trust model, the particular approaches taken in different local contexts and importantly, the extent to which people feel they have the power to make change. However, they are also subject to the different starting points in the 15 areas; the skills and experience present in 2011, and associated with this, the scale of ambition. There were Big Local areas that had a head-start, in that they had community and organisational leadership already in place (such as Lawrence Weston). In such areas, Big Local has aspirations for transformational change and the confidence that it can overcome the challenges it might meet. There were others that have had to build this (such as Catton Grove, Revoe and Westfield who are still struggling to engage and energise and build local leadership). The challenges to change are explored in the following section.

4 The challenges and dilemmas of resident led change

Resident-led change can face multiple challenges and dilemmas, as reported in [earlier evaluations](#). These can be ‘**internal**’ – in terms of personalities and the way the partnership operates; they may relate to the nature of, and pressures facing, **the wider community**, or they can be **external forces** related to local and national policy change.

4.1 Internal challenges: partnership working

As noted in section 3, partnership members and workers spend considerable amounts of time and energy creating a culture around the way the partnership works: being non-judgemental, valuing the different skills and contributions people bring and building mutual respect. Partnership members interviewed for the evaluation, as well as those keeping reflective diaries, noted the difficulties of building such a culture. Individual personalities ‘*can get in the way*’, particularly where there are sectional interests – either around a ‘*pet project*’ or where advocacy for a particular part of the Big Local area over-rides ‘*the interests of the whole community*.’ One of the Our Bigger Story diary keepers has reflected on the amount of work required, often behind the scenes, to ‘clear the waters’ and keep plans positive and moving forward.

Beyond personalities, partnership members talked of the difficulties of balancing local knowledge and technical skills within the membership. Residents could defer to professionals sitting on the partnership and/or rely on workers to guide, or indeed dominate, decision making processes. The following example, involving a discussion between a Big Local partner and worker illustrate these potential dynamics at work:

‘The partnership has the power. The partnership votes on everything’

‘I probably should not say this but power within the partnership.....it’s with the workers and the volunteers. We have an inactive partnership so anything we take to the partnership is voted through. It all depends on how we (workers) present things to the partnership.

Or again:

‘So we had [the workers] shouting at us and trying to bully us into making a decision and saying ‘We’ve only got 3 weeks to make this decision and you’re being stupid and we think you should make this decision now’ and it really was bullying at the highest degree..... and one or two of the other women there, I could see they were getting really upset about this and, in the end, one of the womenshe actually stepped in and said ‘Look, I think the committee are right, they have thought about all these things, and you can’t just shout at them as if they’d never thought about them’ [OBS diary keeper]

Partnership members can be acutely aware of such internal power imbalances. For this reason, in some instances, partnerships have deliberately excluded locally elected members for fear that they would have undue influence (though as the [film on the meaning of resident led](#) change illustrates this has been controversial). [In](#)

[Revoe](#) concerns on all sides that workers might become too influential have resulted in the decision to hold resident only partnership meetings, a practice that Growing Together cites as the most significant decision it ever made.

Across all OBS areas, however, the concern remains that the formality of partnership meetings – linked to members’ feelings of accountability for the funding – is a barrier to wider participation in decision making processes and for building wider participation in partnerships and Big Local as a whole.¹⁴ This emphasis on a degree of formality is understandable. Local residents on partnerships are aware that they are accountable for the money and how it is spent – but also feel that they need to be seen to be accountable and have, therefore, often adopted highly formalised ways of working which resemble those of local authority committees or charity boards.

There are also questions about how partnership energies are expended. As Big Local areas reach the point of planning the legacy of their work and/or its sustainability, increasing attention is being paid to highly technical and legal issues. These may be around the legal aspects of constitutions (for example, whether to become a Charitable Incorporated Organisation or Community Interest Company or a Community Benefit Society) and how these structures relate to the governance and ownership of assets such as community hubs. There is a danger that Big Locals become pre-occupied with the dry minutiae at the expense of more engaging activities. It will be interesting to observe whether setting up an independent constituted structure leads people to act in the interests of the structure rather than the interests of the community and thus become more risk averse.

4.2 Exerting influence: external force

Linked to the above, partnerships, even those with strong links with the different tiers of local government (from parish, to district to unitary to combined authorities) often struggled to influence authority decisions which directly impacted on their communities. Influence remained within the Big Local area rather than looking, or being able to influence, beyond the boundaries.

This ‘parochialism’ or lack of broader strategic thinking applied even where Big Local areas were delivering against local (and, indeed, national) policy objectives. As noted in section 2, the majority of areas are working to reduce social isolation – but with little or no reference or connection to the Long Term Plan for the NHS¹⁵ or the government strategy on loneliness. Others are working on issues of cohesion, without reference to, for example, the Home Office (2019) Indicators of Integration¹⁶. Still other areas working to develop social enterprises but in isolation from wider networks. For example, Birchfield and Three Parishes are both working towards

¹⁴ This issue remains a concern across partnerships and is discussed in more detail in the 2017 OBS report <https://localtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/OBS-Beyond-the-Early-Years-Full-Report-Final.pdf>

¹⁵ National Health Service/Department of Health (2019) *NHS Long Term Plan*. London, National Health Service/Department of Health, London <https://www.longtermplan.nhs.uk/publication/nhs-long-term-plan/>

¹⁶ Home Office (2019) *Indicators of Integration Framework*. London, Home Office

objectives which match those in the West Midlands Inclusive Growth Strategy¹⁷, yet without knowing it.

This issue of influence is even more acute where power lies beyond the usual local governance structures. For example, the development of Ebbsfleet Garden City is having a major impact on Northfleet, but Big Local ‘feels ignored’ by the Development Corporation, even when it comes to discussing opportunities to create local jobs within the area – see [Change all around Northfleet film](#).

Similarly, Bountagu sits within a 25-year development area and is struggling effectively to engage with Meridian Water. Meanwhile, the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham will have a [major impact on Birchfield](#) as the community closest to the new athletes’ village and accompanying infra-structure developments. Yet again, Big Local feels excluded from the planning and development processes, as below.

‘When the Commonwealth Games came we were promised prosperity, and this is an area in need of prosperity. We were promised many things. This included social housing which included 250 - 280 houses which were going to be available for local people. We were promised jobs for local people in the construction of the site. So far, and the project is about 18 months in, we know of 2 local people who have been employed, that’s all. The social housing has been reduced from 250-280 to 58 houses. The houses, or rather accommodation, will then go on sale or rent at very inflated prices.

What I can see from my research is that Perry Barr (Birchfield) will not benefit from the construction of these buildings in any way now or in the future. In fact we’ll be worse off as we will have a higher density of population and a more difficult road structure...when the new construction is completed there will be a 10 lane high way. It will be impossible for people to cross the road. (Big Local partnership member)

See also: [Change around Birchfield](#) film

There are, therefore, a number of fundamental limitations around the concept of resident led and where hyper local-decision making ‘sits’ with broader political forces and processes. As stated in the 2019 OBS [Resident Led Change](#) paper, ‘*Learning from the 15 case studies exposes the constraints ... around the idea of resident led, and highlights some of the frustrations that people in Big Local areas experience. Resident led development is in reality a negotiated process into which power dynamics, the local context, history and structures need to be factored*’. Interviews with people active in Big Local partnerships have illustrated that they can see ‘*the big power brokers*’ but for the most part struggle to analyse power dynamics or to develop constructive strategies to build their own power base alongside potential allies. This is perhaps a topic that Local Trust could help with further, through the Reps and networking and learning events.

¹⁷ See <http://www.metrodynamics.co.uk/blog/2018/6/11/linking-cranes-with-communities-west-midlands-combined-authority-launches-inclusive-growth-unit>

5 Conclusions and reflections

Big Local has, at its core, a model of community led change at a hyper-local level which is based on long term funding and support. This report has highlighted examples of change, what has helped and the challenges faced, based on evidence from 15 Big Local areas. This final section explores some of the elements that have underpinned the Big Local model.

5.1 The Big Local approach

Time

Big Local is unique as a continuous programme that allows its recipients 10 -15 years to create and deliver a vision for their communities. This has enabled communities to work at their own pace in building a steering group and then a partnership, carrying out a community profile, designing timed plans to meet local aspirations, and then implementing them. Some Big Locals were up and running within a short space of time, some took three years to submit their first plan. Some Big Locals such as Growing Together will have used its million by mid-2020, whilst a few of the case study areas are still struggling to get more people involved. But the point about Big Local is that unlike other programmes that would have been and gone, there is still time to do more, even if it is hard:

'You feel quite despondent about it.... It's four more years, but I won't give up, because that's how determined we are to make [names area] a better place to live.' (Big Local partnership member)

The long term nature has allowed for people to get involved, 'back off' for a period, and then come back. For Grassland Hasmoor Big Local, time has created the opportunity to engage more and more people through its activities and working groups and to achieve an annual turnover of residents on its partnership board. In all of the 15 areas, time has enabled individuals and community groups to build agency – in one area, a resident who never went out has slowly become more and more involved to the point where she is thinking of taking on a community leadership role - standing to be the chair of the partnership. Time has allowed for Big Locals to embed themselves and the activities they fund and has afforded Bountagu Big Local the time to rebuild itself and design new plans which they still have the time to implement:

'I'm actually quite proud that we didn't give up and we've still got that money.' (Big Local partnership member)

A number of Big Local areas are involved with the development of substantial capital projects which have been slow to develop. For example, in Lawrence Weston, it is estimated that *'community housing, from the first idea to completion will take nine years'* (Big Local worker). Similarly, in Birchfield, Grassland Hasmoor, Radstock and Ramsey, there have been delays (of between three and five years) in planning permissions and drawing down additional funds for community hubs and other

community infra-structure projects like a new GP practice or a skate park. In each case the Big Local is still engaged with these processes, through the time allowed and the accompanying budget flexibilities, in ways that would have been impossible for an initiative with a shorter life span.

As the programme has evolved however, dimensions of time have also been a challenge for some. For example, in partnerships which rely on a small number of, already pressured, partnership members, the long term life span of the programme can result in a lack of urgency in decision making and action. Feeling rather low about progress one partnership member stated *'I wish the end of this would come'*.

Also, as a long term initiative, Big Local has cut across several local government cycles of elections – so relationships with external power holders can shift fundamentally, more than once, with a change in administration. This may be a blessing or a curse.

Support

The support element, intended to be flexible and responsive, has been delivered through the Big Local Reps, training and networking events, and advice and expertise from programme partners (website information on [Big Local support](#)). Partnership members see the Reps as the most constant source of support and therefore have clearer views about their value. Some areas may have had one rep all the way through, whereas others have had three. Although Local Trust has invested in bringing Reps together several times a year and refreshing their role and guidance about how to carry it out, there is, unsurprisingly, variance in the how Reps interact with Big Local partnerships.

Whilst some Reps interpret their role as a 'silent partner' only there to give advice and guidance, evidence indicates that others have been much more proactive in shaping partnership agendas, aspects of the community plan and its delivery – or deferred to as one of the professionals. One case study area values its newer Rep for being straight with them, pushing them, helping them plan and untangling difficult relationships with other agencies. Partnership members in another area value their latest Rep for bringing enthusiasm, for listening and their can do attitude; *'... wants it to work'* rather than *'Well it's up to you what you want to do, if it happens, it happens, if it don't, it don't.'* One partnership also felt that they had been given information/guidance which suited the Rep but wasn't correct. In another area, residents still reflect on the Local Trust decision to replace their Rep which left them feeling disempowered.

Overall however, the 'hands on, hands off' approach that Local Trust has taken with its pool of Reps has illustrated a welcome responsive support mechanism. One area that found itself in difficulties was supplied with more intensive support from a Rep who over a period of time, helped the partnership *'to kind of pull it together'*.

Locally Trusted Organisations (LTOs)

The LTO model was intended to free Big Local partnerships from an inward looking focus, bureaucracy and the detail of money management. The roles played by LTOs,

as the bodies accountable for the finance and sometimes the employer of Big Local staff and/ or legal owner/ manager of Big Local buildings, have been interpreted differently across areas. As described earlier in the report, some act solely as bankers and indeed as a credit union that is the expertise they bring to the role for Barrowcliff Big Local. In other areas, the LTO function has been carried out by a local community based organisation and in Growing Together, Lawrence Weston and in Ramsey, they will be the legacy body, taking on learning from Big Local approach.

Whilst the emphasis is on residents in the lead however, LTOs do have the capacity to undermine resident action and be influential in decision making processes, perhaps because they don't value or understand the resident led decision making ethos of Big Local, or because assessment of risk and accountability to their own governance structures takes priority:

'....potential for a massive veto over decisions that the partnership might want to take danger that comes with it is the power and the influence that you give to the LTO's because of the risk that they're taking'. (External agency)

Several of the 15 case study areas have had differences with their LTO at some point and replaced them with another body. In the absence of strong community leadership, the Big Local model can give scope for LTOs to effectively shape the programme in their area. This was never the intention.

It is interesting to note that many Big Local partnerships are moving towards incorporation as a legal entity, and it will be useful to learn whether this does lead the more inward-looking focus that Local Trust was concerned about at the start of the programme.

The Big Local partnerships

Big Local partnerships were established early on in each Big Local area – they were intended to be the (un-constituted) body which would oversee delivery of residents' visions and a community plan as agreed with Local Trust. Each partnership must have at least 51% resident membership. The NCVO 2014 'Early Years' study (when most Big Locals were not fully operational) found evidence that that partnerships were getting bogged down in detail and not seeing the bigger picture/vision for the community, and in the OBS 2017 '[Beyond the Early Years](#)' report, this evaluation team judged there to be a 'fragile maturity' across partnerships in the 15 case study areas – in that partnerships were better able to make complex decisions (maturity) but could be fragile as they are relying on a small group of activists. By 2019, Our Bigger Story has found that some have moved on from this, though they have different manifestations of strengths, and weaknesses.

With regards to 'maturity', Growing Together has clearly developed and nearly all of its partnership members (most of whom had never done anything like this before) now sit as trustees of the legacy body, Growing Together Northampton. There are another three or four partnerships which can now be described as 'sturdy' – they have some dynamism in that new people have joined the partnership / taken on new roles (though ensuring enough people are residents of the Big Local area can still be a problem due to where Big Local boundaries lie); people work together reasonably

well to make change happen (although this might require a lot of work in the background); and they wouldn't crumble if one or two people left. There are a couple of partnerships that function well but are reliant on one or two key people and would be very fragile if they left, and another couple that have struggled with conflict and tensions. The rest, have not really moved on from fragile maturity, either because they have lacked leadership and drive or because they have been over reliant on paid workers who dominate. Bountagu Big Local has been very fragile due to internal conflict in the partnership and with its previous LTO, but is now rebuilding itself and feels it is likely to be much stronger in the future.

In terms of where energy is going, there is still substantial effort going into delivery rather than being strategic. In a few areas a lot of time spent on the formation of an incorporated body and its implications – both of these potentially diverting the partnership from its bigger vision. But there are other areas that have over time become much clearer about what is appropriate for partnership time, and what needs to be dealt with elsewhere. Barrowcliff Big Local for example, has a separate informal and open session where the detail can be worked through prior to Big Local partnership meetings.

The hyper-local approach

This is a programme strength in terms of securing community involvement at a meaningful level – engaging people who are passionate about where they live and want to make it 'even better'. It also engages partners and other key players who are highly committed to their locality. The scale is manageable. Nevertheless, there are those Big Local areas that feel they cover too many areas, and others that feel that their area is not big enough to attract involvement and do anything very meaningful. Several partnership members have quietly reported that their activities wouldn't be viable if they only served the people of the Big Local area – in some cases most of the participants come from outside.

The hyper local nature of Big Local can also be a challenge in terms of power and influence – particularly where there are several tiers of government and a far away county council base:

'... too far away geographically to influence',

This can also be the case within large unitary authorities. One local authority officer interviewed in a big urban authority described the Big Local in their area as:

'A small cog within the ward. Which in turn is a small cog within the constituency and a very small cog within the city as a whole'

5.2 The community dimension

The structures and cultures which promote and/or inhibit resident led change are complex. Then there is the issue of how Big Local partnerships relate to the wider community and the nature of those communities themselves.

Firstly, for some in Big Local communities, there are the sheer day to day pressures of survival, never mind engaging in resident led change. As one interviewee commented:

'Don't you think I have enough to worry about putting food on the table never mind how you spend your lottery money.' (Partnership interview: see also [Revoe film](#) on difficult issues)

Secondly, whilst partnership members talk about community 'apathy' there is also an acknowledgement of a degree of justified scepticism:

We've been let down in the past, so why is this [Big Local] going to be any different. We'll just be let down again' (see also Change all around [Northfleet](#) and [Birchfield](#) films).

'Everyone finds it hard to engage people here'. (Big Local partnership members)

Thirdly, there is the challenge of building engagement and participation in transient communities raised in the Local Trust sponsored 'The Future of Communities' report (IVAR 2018)¹⁸ and in its 2019 report, [Rethinking Home](#) (Just ideas 2019)¹⁹. That transience, however, can take different forms. In Revoe there is the extreme transience reflected in the local primary school population. No pupil starting year one at school in September 2017 was there at the end of the academic year in 2018. There is the transience, in Hanwell where a major housing refurbishment has meant that often long established residents and families have been decanted – often 'out of district' – with concerns that increased rents and changes in housing tenure will mean that they are unable to return. Then there is the transience of incomers in rural communities such as the Three Parishes – where people move in – but are out-commuters who may stay for a number of years – then move on - but not connect with the local community.

Finally, there are issues of conflict, or at least tensions, between communities and groups within the Big Local area. In Revoe, for example, this is around the issue of drugs and alcohol. Everyone agrees what the problem is, but there are those for whom the 'solution' is the criminal justice system and moving people on – for others the solutions are early interventions and support in the community. In Northfleet there have, historically, been tensions between estates that fall within the Big Local area. Indeed several areas have reported a lack of trust between different geographical areas within their Big Local boundary, and although these are gradually disappearing, they have at times got in the way of making desired change.

However, Our Bigger Story has uncovered a lot of very positive stories of change. The concept of putting residents at the very heart of change in their communities is a challenge for residents and outside agencies alike (albeit for very different reasons)

¹⁸ IVAR (2018) *The future of communities: perspectives on power*. London, Local Trust https://localtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/local_trust_the_future_for_communities_perspectives_on_power.pdf

¹⁹ <https://localtrust.org.uk/insights/research/rethinking-home/>

but is showing its value up and down the country. And these changes result from a lot more than the money.

This evaluation is unique in that it is an opportunity to follow Big Local areas over a long period of time, including those that have 'spent out'. It allows for robust testing of the Local Trust hypothesis around how Big Local is embedding agency and has the potential to leave a legacy for community leadership. This enables Our Bigger Story to build an understanding of outcomes and impact beyond Big Local being 'just' a funding stream, and to develop a greater understanding of the programme's legacy. This may be a change in mind-sets to a 'can do' mentality and strengthened community leadership. It may be the establishment of sustainable community hubs and viable resident led organisations. It may be physical improvements to the look of a place and longer-term community based services and facilities. A final thought around how Big Local has provided the impetus and the support for residents to take action comes fittingly, from a resident:

'You say that the money has given us credibility, I don't think it has to be honest. I think that money has given us the resources to earn that credibility through our actions, not just the fact that we have got £1 million sat in the bank.'

Appendix: Evaluation methods

In building the evidence base for the current report, OBS has adopted a mixed methods model of evaluation (Creswell and Planto Clark 2010²⁰). These have included:

- Desk research reviewing individual Big Local area documentation (such as their refreshed delivery plans/reports and materials uploaded to the [OBS website](#)) as well as reports and publications produced by Local Trust
- A series of thematic 'Time for a Change' events in six areas, with 151 participants which brought together Big local partnerships with external stakeholders to reflect on progress against objectives – and the challenges of affecting change. These sessions were supported by a grant of up to £750 for participating areas to cover administrative and venue costs
- A learning and reflections residential in June 2019 attended by 30 representatives from 13 Big Local areas
- Over 2017 and 2018 some nine focus groups (with 55 participants) were conducted with Big Local partnerships and stakeholders. A further 24 focus groups were conducted over 2019 with 196 participants.
- A total of 208 individual interviews with Big Local partnership members, representatives from Locally Trusted Organisations, local residents, delivery partners and other stakeholders over the three years (30 in 2017, 97 in 2018 and a further 81 in 2019). These interviews explored the [concept of resident led](#) change, approaches to [community leadership](#) and the nature of change in Big Local areas.
- 70 additional interviews were conducted in 2018 with key policy makers across the 15 Our Bigger Story areas to inform the [Outside-In report](#) on external perceptions of Big Local. The above interview figures exclude short 'vox pops' interviews at filmed events.
- Reflective diaries kept for two periods of 6 months over both 2018 and 2019 by Big Local partnership members and resident/workers in seven Big Local areas
- An activity and matched funding survey to all 15 areas with responses from 11 areas.

In terms of evaluation outputs, [three open access reports](#) have been produced over 2018-19 and are available on the OBS website – with a further internal, reflective, paper produced for internal use by Local Trust. In addition, some 37 films have been produced over the last three years (in addition to a film festival hosted in 2017 showcasing Big Local areas – nationally – own multi-media materials) reflecting on the nature of, and challenges to, change in Big Local areas. These are available on the [OBS vimeo channel](#) where there are currently over 80 films (as well as nearly [400 'posts'](#) by areas themselves²¹) – recording both change in individual Big Local areas as well as discussions on a range of evaluation themes and issues.

²⁰ Creswell, J. and Planto Clark, V. (2017) *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research* (Third Edition), London, Sage

²¹ Some 284 posts have been added to the website by Big Local areas between 2017 and 2019

Finally, the OBS website was re-designed during 2019 to make it easier to navigate and search for materials by key words/themes as well as by different media and Big Local outcomes. Google Analytics shows that the Our Bigger Story website has had 1,400 unique users in the last 12 months, with 2,300 views.

About the Third Sector Research Centre

The third sector provides support and services to millions of people. Whether providing front-line services, making policy or campaigning for change, good quality research is vital for organisations to achieve the best possible impact. The Third Sector Research Centre exists to develop the evidence base on, for and with the third sector in the UK. Working closely with practitioners, policy-makers and other academics, TSRC is undertaking and reviewing research, and making this research widely available. The Centre works in collaboration with the third sector, ensuring its research reflects the realities of those working within it, and helping to build the sector's capacity to use and conduct research. There are currently 145 working and shorter briefing papers on the [TSRC website](#) addressing critical issues in the voluntary and community sectors.

Third Sector Research Centre, Department of Social Policy, Sociology and Criminology
University of Birmingham, Birmingham, B15 2TT

Tel: 0121 415 8561

www.tsrc.ac.uk

Contact the authors

Angus McCabe

Tel: 0121 415 8561

Email: a.j.mccabe@bham.ac.uk

Mandy Wilson

Email: Mandy.wilson7@virginmedia.com



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons [Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](#).

© TSRC 2020

