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# Volunteering and Big Local

Who volunteers in Big Local communities, what they do, and why

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# Executive summary

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This report is about the residents who give up their time to volunteer in their local communities. It explores the characteristics of volunteering linked to the Big Local programme, and how Big Local areas encourage and support that volunteering for the benefit of residents and communities

Big Local is a resident-led funding programme providing groups of people in 150 areas in England with £1.15m each, to spend across 10 to 15 years to bring about lasting change in their neighbourhoods. In Big Local areas, resident-led partnerships identify local priorities and decide how the money will be spent in their areas. Each Big Local partnership is supported by a rep, funded by Local Trust. Decisions about resources are made based on the needs of communities, with the aim in all Big Local areas of increasing resident involvement and enabling them to make a positive difference in their own communities.

Volunteering means people giving their time up to help for free. This can take many forms: formal and informal; larger and smaller commitments of time and responsibility; regular and now-and-again. Some give up their time to become partnership members and support Big Local decision-making. Others don't like to be called volunteers; they see it as just helping their neighbours and community. One Big Local worker told us: "It's more about helping, old school community spirit."

For the purposes of this research, it is this broader volunteering and involvement we are looking at: roles linked to or enabled by Big Local but excluding the partnership volunteering role.

How does it come about? What does it involve? What makes it work? In what ways do individuals and communities benefit?

We spoke to volunteers, partnerships, paid workers, reps and local organisations to understand the characteristics of Big Local volunteering and what helps to make it happen. To help understand what makes it different we compared Big Local volunteering to the picture of national volunteering, as described in the National Council of Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)'s National Survey on the Volunteer Experience, Time Well Spent (2019).<sup>1</sup>

## What are the characteristics of volunteering activities in Big Local?

We found volunteering outside of the partnerships taking place in almost all Big Local areas, with an estimated 6,500 volunteering roles across the country. This is in

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ncvo.org.uk/images/documents/policy\\_and\\_research/volunteering/Volunteer-experience\\_Full-Report.pdf](https://www.ncvo.org.uk/images/documents/policy_and_research/volunteering/Volunteer-experience_Full-Report.pdf)

addition to the 1,506 partnership members<sup>2</sup> across Big Local areas. There exists a wide range of roles, all supporting communities and involving residents in different ways. Often tailored to the needs and characteristics of the local community, these roles often involve events and activities that are highly varied and often innovative.

The types of activities involved can affect whether residents are attracted to volunteering, and the number of volunteers involved. Figure 1 below shows the distribution of the different types of volunteering roles across Big Local areas nationally, as estimated by reps. In our research we looked at which of these activities are most effective in attracting volunteers and help to bring about local change.

Volunteering itself involves varying levels of commitment and involvement, and the amount of time people are able to give often links to the type of volunteering they choose. A low commitment is usually the first step, and volunteering often builds from here. In some cases, particularly when people were already familiar with volunteering, or confident in their skills, their initial approach often involved making a more regular commitment, and we found that many volunteers hold multiple volunteering roles.

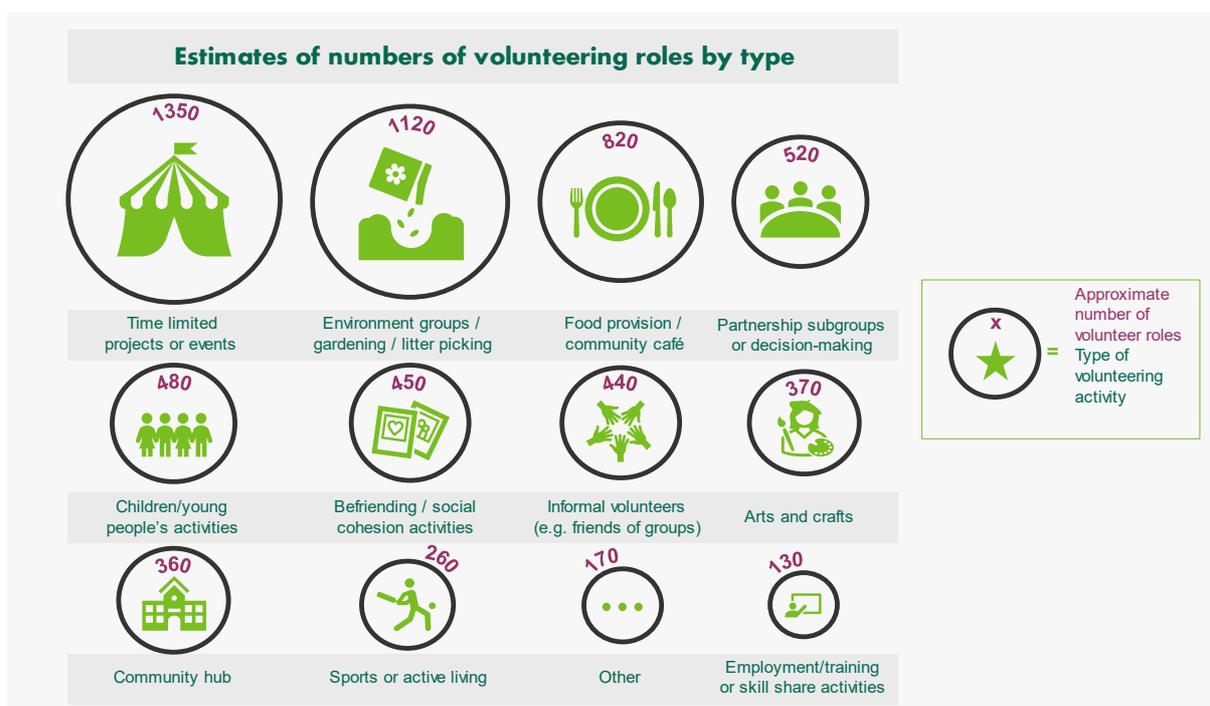


Figure. 1: Distribution of volunteer roles by type across all Big Local areas (Reps' survey, Dec. 2021)

In many ways, volunteering in Big Local areas mirrors national trends in volunteering, but there is evidence that it is more likely to help to connect community members and/or have an immediate, visible impact on the local physical environment. Activities and events attracting the most volunteers are those which are visible and physically embedded in the very local (or so-called hyper-local) community, and which provide low commitment, time-limited ways of getting involved.

<sup>2</sup> Local Trust internal partnership reviews (2021)

Most volunteers associated with Big Local consider their volunteering of benefit to their local community, and they value this. Although their first priority is often the project or activity their volunteering involves, they like that it offers opportunities to give back and feel connected through community participation or celebration.

Large-scale community events and celebrations involve large numbers of volunteers at one time and encourage the whole community to participate. They can connect people, raise participation and the involvement of volunteers, and increase civic pride. One volunteer said: "I found it very uplifting to be part of this community."

Big Local volunteering is more likely than national volunteering to be focused on environmental groups, gardening or litter-picking (17 per cent of Big Local volunteering, compared to 11 per cent in the 2019 NCVO survey). These activities are very popular, highly visible and seem to chime with the difference residents want to see in their neighbourhoods. They are also easy to organise and engage with. One rep told us: "Local gardening projects have really brought together all parts of the community".

Providing food for others – as emergency supplies or in cafés – is another way that volunteers often support their communities. This has particularly been the case during the COVID-19 pandemic, with some Big Local areas now looking at how they can take this forward for the long term, such as through cooking classes and selling food affordably. Providing food has acted as an incentive and a leveller, supporting connections between community members, encouraging people to stay and talk, and promoting a sense of belonging.

## **How do Big Local partnerships build and support volunteering?**

Partnerships create volunteering opportunities directly, or work with other organisations to create opportunities providing benefit to community members. They do this in response to local need and demand, and to create more community participation and ownership. While some Big Local areas have volunteers directly linked to their partnership, it is more common that partnerships facilitate and help volunteering to happen by funding activities and organisations that involve volunteers. In addition, partnerships work to encourage and support volunteering and community involvement generally.

Many Big Local areas fund community centres, and we found that residents seek out these community spaces when they want to volunteer or connect with their community. These centres provide a combination of local physical space, funding, and support, offering some of the best and most accessible opportunities for residents to volunteer and begin a journey towards greater involvement and community leadership. Big Local areas with no community centres or hubs find this much more difficult.

Volunteers linked to Big Local are often supported and coordinated by paid workers and other volunteers. In over half of the Big Local areas, partnerships fund a paid worker, and volunteer coordination is a key part of their role. We found that a specific, dedicated volunteer support or brokerage role was less common, but

where this approach has been taken, there tend to be plans for it to continue after Big Local funding ends.

## **Who wants to be a volunteer?**

Volunteers in Big Local are drawn from a wide and diverse pool of community members. We found that some groups of people were more likely to take up volunteering, including those who:

- have increased time on their hands due to a major life change
- are seeking a community connection due to moving to a new area or feeling isolated
- are already committed to volunteering and have other roles
- have an interest or enthusiasm for a particular topic or activity
- have a religion or philosophy that values community and helping others
- have benefitted from volunteering or from the work of an organisation.
- have shifted over time from being participants or beneficiaries to becoming volunteers.

## **What do volunteers get out of it?**

Volunteers value recognition and acknowledgement of their contributions and want regular communication. It also helps to anticipate their needs by considering things like expenses in advance to ensure they won't be out of pocket, and making sure there are tasks or roles ready for them when they are asked to be available.

People benefit from volunteering in several ways, linked to their own needs and motivations. Most volunteers we spoke to really enjoyed their volunteering activities, despite the demands on their time, and valued the broader sense of connection to their own communities – of being a part of things and giving back.

As their confidence increases, volunteers can gain confidence and take on roles with increasing levels of responsibility, including taking part in decision-making. Sometimes progression is something a volunteer is seeking, for example if they want to gain employment or become more active in community leadership and decision-making. But for some, progression is neither wanted or needed, their contribution is still valuable, and they appreciate deciding for themselves how much involvement is right for them.

## **How are volunteers involved in Big Local decision making?**

Three phases are identified in the decision-making over Big Local resources. We found volunteers involved in the information-gathering and discussion phases, and that they were consulted rather than participating themselves. We also saw

volunteer input into the fourth practical phase, deciding how allocated funds are used to deliver services or activities.

We did not find reliable evidence of volunteers who were not partnership members being at the table when the actual decisions were being made.

We did find some volunteers who started in very modest ways and were encouraged to take on more responsibility who were taking decisions as full partnership members.

We found that volunteers are able to influence decision-making by working alongside partnership members who also volunteer, and by applying to Big Local for grants to realise their ideas and provide local services and activities.

Partnership members often had multiple volunteering roles. We found that their participation as frontline volunteers alongside community volunteers, could make them more aware of local priorities and give community volunteers informal, non-intimidating opportunities to bend their ears. We also found that their participation in Big Local grew their understanding of community-led approaches. Combined, these factors could influence their decision-making to become more resident-led, participatory and community-focused, both in Big Local and in other community leadership roles.

## **Summary of key recommendations for encouraging volunteer participation in Big Local**

### **Use welcoming people and spaces to build confidence and help people to get started**

Community centres generate (and the people who work in them support) a wide range of volunteering opportunities. They are a focal point for volunteering activity and community involvement and attract new and experienced volunteers, those who are very local and people who are new to the area.

Workers in community centres are often a catalyst for people making the shift from visitor to volunteer. They support people to develop the confidence to volunteer. They also help residents to develop their ideas, to identify local needs and opportunities and support their volunteering by helping with paperwork and bureaucracy.

### **Environmental projects and litter picking encourage volunteering and improve the local area**

Environmental volunteering, gardening and litter picks are among the most successful ways of engaging a wide range of volunteers of different ages and bringing about immediate, visible community benefit. Litter and the physical environment are often a priority and concern for residents. These types of activities often don't require a regular commitment, and are relatively accessible, easy to resource and organise. They are hyper-local and make a direct, perceptible difference which other residents can see. They are also rewarding, make it easy to work alongside others, and the outdoor activity can also be beneficial to volunteers' wellbeing.

### **Community events and celebrations attract a lot of volunteers and bring the community together**

One-off events attract the highest numbers of volunteers. Many people are needed to carry out such events, and they can all volunteer at once for a manageable amount of time. These activities are highly varied, and customisable to the characteristics and needs of the local community. They are often joyful and celebratory events, helping volunteers and community members take pride in their Big Local area.

### **Volunteering is very varied, and matching volunteers to activities effectively is important**

It's important to find the right volunteering activity for each volunteer. People tend to volunteer according to their interests. Big Local-supported sports, arts and crafts, and children's activities attract volunteers wanting to share their interests and skills. Volunteers' needs, capabilities and availability all need to be considered. To raise volunteering levels, Big Local areas need to attract and match volunteering opportunities and volunteers, and brokerage, offering support to both sides, can be an effective way to do this. Having encouraged people to volunteer it is important to then follow through by making sure that roles and opportunities are readily available for them.

### **Volunteers need encouragement and support**

Supporting volunteers can be extremely resource-intensive, and usually requires a skilled paid worker or volunteer leader. Many volunteers have their own support needs, especially in the early stages. We found that often there is not one specific moment when a person becomes a volunteer; it is often a journey, with small steps, which can sometimes be backwards, of taking on additional responsibility. Good support helps volunteers navigate this journey effectively, towards benefit and progression in line with their aims and needs. All volunteers value being acknowledged and feeling appreciated.

### **Minimise the formality where possible, and get help with the legalities, policies and procedures**

Policies, procedures, DBS checks and risk assessments are all important tools in helping to keep volunteers safe and avoid conflict. However, they can also be a barrier and discourage participation. It is advisable to seek support to keep policies as effective but unintrusive as possible, with minimal administrative burden for the volunteers and the organisations hosting them.

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# Introduction

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Volunteers are at the heart of the Big Local programme. People stepping forward to volunteer in their communities are essential to building strong, local social infrastructure.

The Big Local programme is innovative in its core objective of giving local residents power over how funding is spent. Residents decide collectively how to use funds via a broad framework including: a resident-led governance partnership; involvement of the wider community in developing and delivering a local plan; a review of progress over time; and adapting the plan as necessary.

Big Local areas were selected between 2010 and 2012 by the National Lottery Community Fund, in collaboration with local authorities and local civil society organisations. Many of the places selected as Big Local areas suffered from low levels of civic activity – they were chosen because they had not received what was perceived to be their fair share of lottery funding, typically because of a lack of community organisation, organised activity, or advocacy to bring funding into the area. It is these services and facilities that help to connect a community and bind them together.

Each Big Local area receives £1.15m over 10-15 years from Local Trust for residents to use to improve their own neighbourhoods. Partnerships are supported by a rep, provided by Local Trust, and by a locally trusted organisation (LTO), chosen by partnerships, to minimise the need for bureaucracy by holding money and making contracts on their behalf.

This research looks at the nature and experience of volunteering associated with Big Local. It explores how volunteers are engaged and supported, how they help with the delivery of Big Local plans and the contribution they make to their communities. Along with exploring how volunteers are engaged and supported, our research considered how decisions about resources are made in Big Local areas and how volunteers are involved.

Though it may sound a lot, £1.15m over 10 to 15 years – in areas with average populations of 7,500 and relatively high levels of need – is not a huge sum. Where the funding can make a big difference is when it brings local people together in the first place and involves them in how money is spent in their neighbourhoods. Governance over how Big Local money is spent rests with the resident-led partnership, and partnerships are encouraged to collaborate with other local organisations. This means that the governance space is not limited to partnership

members, and many partnerships aim to involve the wider community in the local area to contribute to priority setting, decision-making and plan delivery.<sup>3</sup>

While the COVID-19 pandemic impacted many formal types of volunteering and community activities, such as indoor events and group meetings, it also led to lots of informal and spontaneous volunteering. Our research, like Local Trust's rapid research for COVID-19,<sup>4</sup> found that many people volunteered for the first time during the pandemic, often through food banks and emergency food distribution. Community centres acted as hubs and provided a natural place for many communities to organise their responses to the pandemic. Many people did not see themselves as volunteers per se, but as stepping up to help their communities and assisting neighbours in times of great need. As the furlough scheme ended and being face to face became possible again, we found that many Big Local areas were working out what their new normal would be. Further research is currently planned by Local Trust to explore the impact of COVID-19 on volunteers; here our focus is on a wider consideration of volunteering associated with Big Local.

#### Research questions

##### **1. To what extent does the Big Local model encourage more people to volunteer?**

- a. How has volunteering evolved in Big Local areas and what has driven this?
- b. Does the community-led nature of Big Local make volunteering opportunities different? If so, how?

##### **2. How and why are volunteering opportunities created? Who is involved in creating them?**

- a. What do people get out of volunteering in this context?
- b. Who supports and manages volunteers and how do they do this?

##### **3. How are these volunteers involved in decisions on how Big Local funding is used?**

- a. To what extent does volunteering for Big Local make residents feel more in control of how resources are used?
- b. Does this involvement lead to more community leadership outside the partnership?

## Method<sup>5</sup>

The research took a case-study approach, working with six Big Local areas. Areas were selected based on characteristics of the community and partnership, and capacity to engage in the research. For each of the case study areas, we reviewed and analysed local plans and plan reviews, additional information held by Local Trust, and complementary National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) and government data to help us build on what was already known and identify

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<sup>3</sup> For further reading see: Ponsford et al., 'Power, control, communities and health inequalities. Part II: measuring shifts in power', *Health Promotion International* 2020.

<sup>4</sup> <https://localtrust.org.uk/insights/research/briefing-16-rapid-research-covid-19/>

<sup>5</sup> More detail on the methods adopted is provided in the Appendix, pp53-54.

gaps. We spoke to Big Local partnership members, LTO representatives, community organisations and other volunteers who were not partnership members.

To widen our evidence-base and incorporate views beyond the case study areas, we held discussions with several Big Local workers and partnership members. We were also able to use Local Trust's quarterly rep report to ask reps in all 150 Big Local areas about volunteer involvement.

When we had collated our findings and identified suggestions for good practice in working with volunteers, we wanted to test these out with a wider group of Big Local areas and ask for their input. We did this by running a workshop for Big Local partnerships as part of Local Trust's Keep Connected series of conversations, where we shared findings and held group discussions covering '**How do you find volunteers and how do they find you?**' and '**How do you manage and support volunteers?**'. In analysing all the information collected, we have tried to highlight the experiences of volunteers and partnerships and any advice that we think could be useful for widening community involvement and supporting volunteers.

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# Volunteering across Big Local areas

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Since the beginning of the Big Local programme, people have been getting involved in their communities by joining Big Local partnerships, and through opportunities created by the money made available through the programme. We looked at where and how volunteers become involved, and how the Big Local model enables and supports them.

## What is a volunteer?

The Big Local programme is run by partnerships, led by residents who are volunteers. This research does not focus on these partnership member volunteers, as there is already a considerable amount of evidence and learning on record about them. Instead, the focus of this research is the volunteering that takes place beyond the partnerships, linked in some way to Big Local.

For the purposes of this research, volunteers have been defined as anyone giving their time to help for free, in all types of volunteering. According to responses to our questions in the reps' survey,<sup>6</sup> almost all Big Local areas have activities or events supported or run by volunteers. Some are formal volunteering opportunities with job descriptions, policies and procedures, and even selection interviews. Others are more informal, with people seeing themselves as simply helping out, and involving less structure, coordination or paperwork.

Language is important. Partnership members and workers told us that some people don't recognise or like the term 'volunteering'. They don't consider it relevant to them or what they do, with one Big Local volunteering worker suggesting talking "in people's everyday language ... it's more about helping, old school community spirit". When we spoke to volunteers, it was often the specific activity they were involved in that they talked about, rather than volunteering. This was particularly true of those who volunteered informally and whose activities included one-off tasks, such as helping to stack chairs after an event, or who supported their neighbours with food, medicine or social contact during COVID-19 and were just helping out.

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<sup>6</sup> Local Trust's regular survey of representatives, December 2021

"Think about wording! Not everyone likes to be called a volunteer – there can be a stigma attached to it. Focus instead on activities that draw in people, not just the concept of 'volunteering'." (Paid worker)

And, it is not always clear at which point someone becomes a volunteer. It may be a gradual process or transition from participant to volunteer, with no clear moment of formal engagement. One rep told us:

"We have a range of volunteers who have 'grown' into their roles. They began as participants at regular sessions and just began to take on roles and responsibilities."

Whether people are formal or informal volunteers, or just starting to take on roles, if they are giving up their time to offer help, we have included their experiences and insights in this report.

## Scale of volunteering in Big Local partnerships

Using their regular rep report (December 2021), the reps from all Big Local areas were asked to estimate the scale of volunteer involvement in their areas. They estimated that there may be up to 6,500 volunteering roles associated with Big Local work. Big Local areas have widely varying numbers of volunteer roles, from more than 600 to none, with a mid-point of 24 (Figure 2).

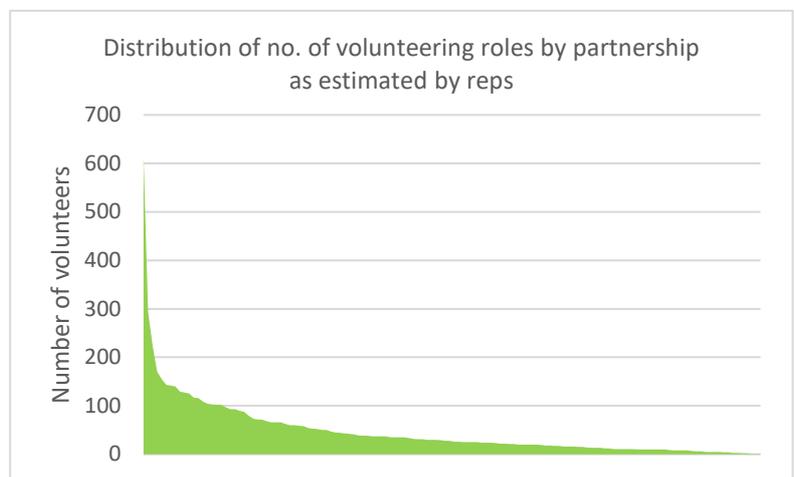


Figure 2: Estimated number of volunteer roles (Rep report)

Reps' survey responses also showed:

- in 10 areas there were no volunteers beyond the Big Local partnership
- in four areas, partnerships were just starting activities to involve more volunteers and hoping to recruit imminently
- three partnerships were not active at the time of the survey or not known to the rep
- in three Big Local areas, the reps may have misunderstood what was being asked, as there was evidence of volunteers beyond these partnerships.

# Types of volunteering roles

Through answers to our questions in the rep report, we were able to gain some understanding of the different types of volunteering activity that residents are engaging with across all the Big Local areas. There exists a wide range of volunteering roles, all supporting the community and involving residents in different ways.

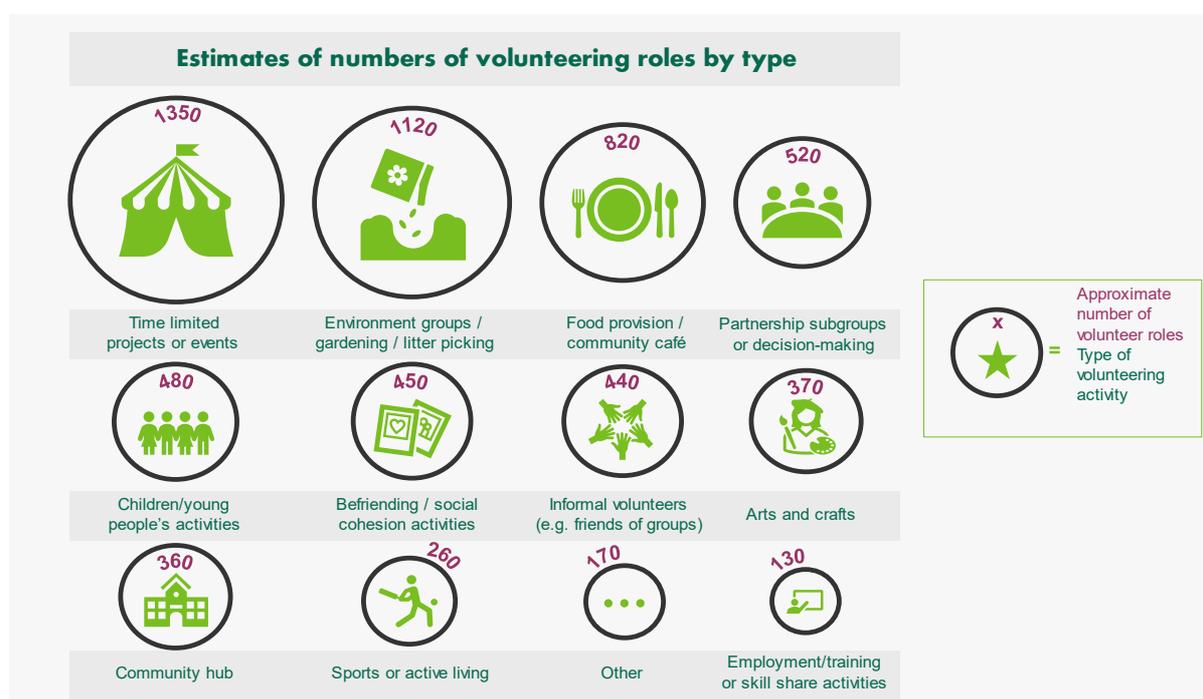


Figure 3 (Figure 1 repeated): Distribution of volunteer roles by type across all Big Local areas (Reps' survey, Dec. 2021)

Location seems to be important; most volunteers recognised and valued that their activities supported their own hyper-local communities in some way. From the types of volunteering activities reported and the feedback we received, we saw how volunteering that engages residents in the improvement of their local communities is attractive to residents, as well as meeting Big Local outcomes, and that it provides both tangible and intangible benefits to volunteers (which we explore later in this report).

## Time-limited projects or events

Time-limited projects or events are activities that do not require a long-term commitment from volunteers, and tend to have a specific, community-orientated goal in mind. Time-limited projects were by far the most popular way of attracting volunteers, with reps estimating there were some 1,350 volunteering roles involved, beyond partnerships. Some 60 Big Local areas had volunteers directly involved in time-limited projects or events. These activities often require large numbers of

volunteers at one time and tend to benefit large sections of the community (for example Christmas fairs and carnivals).

This pattern is similar to the national picture. The National Council of Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) published its National Survey on the Volunteer Experience (Time Well Spent) in January 2019.<sup>7</sup> It found that 23 per cent of volunteers do so exclusively for a one-off activity or dip in and out, compared to a very similar 21 per cent in Big Local.

Event volunteering tends to offer a range of opportunities for different types of volunteers. Many time-limited events are community celebrations, or opportunities to bring the community together. These can attract large numbers of residents as participants, and often give them a chance to get involved in delivery through volunteering for a positive reason. In this way, these activities and events are often used by Big Local areas to connect the community, raise participation and involvement, and increase civic pride. One volunteer said: "I found it very uplifting to be part of this community." One Big Local area's carnival event is a good example of this, attracting hundreds of volunteers in celebration together annually.

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<sup>7</sup> [https://www.ncvo.org.uk/images/documents/policy\\_and\\_research/volunteering/Volunteer-experience\\_Full-Report.pdf](https://www.ncvo.org.uk/images/documents/policy_and_research/volunteering/Volunteer-experience_Full-Report.pdf)

## One-off volunteering to coordinate an event

Sometimes, although an event is time-limited, the volunteering commitment can still be substantial. For example, one Big Local partnership wanted to organise a Christmas fair to raise spirits and get the community together in December 2021. The community in question was described as having two distinct areas, which it can be challenging to bring together, and on top of this the fair was to take place during COVID-19 restrictions.

Putting the fair together needed someone with confidence and strong organisational skills. A suitable volunteer, A, was approached directly by the partnership and happy to take on the organisation of the fair. She has lots of connections, is well-known to local residents, and has some previous volunteering experience. However, A has little interest in regular small-scale volunteering or in being on a committee. She does like a challenge and a big project and was partially motivated by positive memories of an annual local carnival, which was a big, family-centred community event.

A was happy to coordinate this very specific voluntary task. She likes something "to get her teeth into" and had nine weeks to pull the Christmas fair together, with help from the partnership's paid worker for tasks such as paperwork, sorting invoices, and risk assessment. On the day of the fair the partnership provided free food and refreshments, and A drew on partnership members and friends to help out.

Many of the stalls were charities and small businesses, and efforts were made to ensure these were local wherever possible. No charges were made for taking a stall but, with partnership backing, A insisted that stallholders had to give something back to the community, and one local school for children with disabilities made £600 selling handicrafts and benefits in this way. The fair was very successful, with more than 700 people turning up, including 200 children.

A has already started planning the 2022 Christmas fair, plus a big summer event/carnival for 2023, to mark when the Big Local programme comes to an end and is keen for it to go out with what she called "a big bang", with lots of local groups involved.

In one area, a grants scheme is used to support cultural events and celebrations and bring the community together. The rep said:

"This has created diverse engagement in the programme and increased volunteers for the Big Local programme."

Community centres are critical to allowing such events to take place in the centre of communities. We found evidence of volunteers getting involved in one-off or time-limited events such as movie nights, a South Asian heritage poetry event, an oral history project, wreath-making and many more activities, despite the difficulties presented by COVID-19. Volunteers told us that they really enjoyed participating in these events, which aimed to bring the community together physically and seemed more important than ever in 2021. One volunteer said:

“The pandemic has proved people can work together. You need them to be on your side. Community spirit is really important.”

## **Litter-picks and environmental volunteering**

Big Local is all about improving the local communities and neighbourhoods where people live. We know that what people see and experience in their hyper-local area motivates them to get involved and try to make change. People see things that they want to change, like high levels of litter or unsightly areas, so environmental activities are often a high priority. Issues that affect people daily, like litter or dog poo, can be changed through environmental volunteering, with immediate, visible improvement. This kind of volunteering can be simple to arrange and happens on people’s doorsteps, and is therefore very suited to Big Local.

Following time-limited events where the volunteering commitment has clear boundaries, environmental volunteering (often also time-limited) had the highest number of reported volunteer roles. Reps estimated that activities with environmental groups, including gardening and litter picking, involve around 1,120 volunteering roles. The relative benefits and advantages of environmental volunteering were discussed at the Keep Connected workshop for Big Local partnership members, workers and reps. There was strong agreement that litter-picking and gardening in particular were highly successful and popular in Big Local areas.

We spoke to several volunteers who said that this type of opportunity to volunteer was how they first became involved with Big Local. For many, these events represented a low-commitment opportunity to improve their own immediate environment and to give back to their local community. The very visible nature of litter-picking seems to attract the whole community, even without publicity. In one area, older residents who couldn’t take part saw what was happening and encouraged younger family members to go and get involved on the spot. A partnership member told us:

“You see board members cleaning up, elderly people can’t do this, but they come out and talk, then go home and tell kids to go and help out ... It’s very informal, ad hoc.”

This ad hoc nature of involvement was also important to people, with one partnership member commenting:

“We have an annual litter pick and that seems to work well because most people don’t want to commit to regular activities. There are commitment issues with time, so one-off activities work well”.

A volunteer-led project in another Big Local area was triggered by a resident’s idea to improve a small area of her neighbourhood. The volunteer noted that a local street corner looked run-down and would benefit from a flower bed and some paint. From this small beginning, a one-off project was sparked which received support from the partnership. Local residents were invited along for a day to plant flowers and paint rusty posts, with free food and refreshments provided by the Big Local partnership. As a result of taking part, several volunteers were recruited,

including new partnership members, plus people with specific interests in gardening and environmental activities. We were told by the rep that since then:

“Volunteer numbers on our regular monthly litter-picks have fluctuated between three and 12 each session, with 97 volunteers attending throughout the year.”

From the monthly litter-pick, a larger environmental group has been formed, with support from a local organisation, and this is now a strong, active community environment group carrying out a much wider range of activities.

Environmental projects are also successful in attracting a wide range of volunteers. A rep commented: “Local gardening projects have really brought together all parts of the community”. Another rep also told us how environmental and green space projects attract people with learning disabilities, recovering from addiction and those moving forward following a criminal record.

In summary, environment-related volunteering opportunities, such as litter-picks, are excellent for attracting first-time volunteers for several reasons:

- People don't need convincing – litter and the environment are often a priority and immediate concern for people, affecting perceptions of an area and its safety (for instance, of play spaces).
- Activities usually don't require a regular commitment and are less intimidating. They are also easier to walk away from than activities in an indoor space if people feel anxious.
- The benefits are visible. They are hyper-local and make a direct, perceptible difference that residents can see.
- They are rewarding; people gain satisfaction from observing the improvement and take pride in what they have achieved.
- There are tangible health and wellbeing benefits for the volunteers in being outdoors and exercising.
- They are relatively low risk and don't need much equipment, paperwork or organisation and can go ahead no matter how many or how few people turn up.

The visible benefits to the community of environmental activity are often an effective route for promoting Big Local activity and creating a sense of ownership for community members. Taking part helps to spark informal conversations and build relationships between partnership members and residents. During the pandemic, environmental and outdoor activities were part of the limited range of volunteering that could take place, given restrictions on social and indoor contact. The pandemic impacted the importance of green spaces to people, making them more likely to want to use and improve these areas. Working on improving these spaces also provided opportunities to make contact with other people.

We aren't able to make an exact comparison, but the 2019 NCVO survey found only 11 per cent of volunteering activities related to the environment, while the rep

report estimated some 17 per cent of Big Local volunteering involved environmental groups, gardening or litter picking. It is not possible to say that this is all due to the difference between Big Local and other volunteering, as the NCVO survey preceded COVID-19, while our study largely followed lockdown and we know that the pandemic caused people to value green spaces more. However, the hyper-local nature of Big Local puts partnerships in an optimal position to attract informal volunteers to help improve their local neighbourhood. This has been even more important since the onset of the pandemic.

## **Popular hobbies and children's activities**

We found many volunteers whose volunteering stemmed from their passion for a particular hobby or activity. They were highly motivated to spend time doing it, to share their knowledge and enthusiasm, and help create a community around their interest. This is an important route into volunteering; an estimated 1,106 people were volunteering in art and crafts, sports, or children's activities.

In one Big Local area, two volunteers spoke about how craft activities had engaged them in the community. Both felt socially isolated for different reasons and supporting craft clubs at the community centre was a way of sharing their interests and to gain social support. One volunteer said:

"I feel a part of everything now. My friends in the community are closer than family. I feel that I am important."

We met many volunteers who began volunteering around a new activity when they saw a need for their children, and this was particularly true of sports activities. In at least half of the Big Local case study areas, we found football teams funded by Big Local at the instigation of parent volunteers, who go on to engage new, formal, long-term volunteers to support the team. In one area, the football team has gone on to win the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service.

Activities and spending time with children to provide them with engaging interests is important to many volunteers in Big Local areas. In one, a parent wanted to start a Forest School for children and engaged with Big Local to secure funding and find a venue. At the same community centre there is a long-term weekly activity club for children and parents, Stay and Play, which also offers occasional seasonal events. The volunteers here are mostly parents who want to give back and to give their children opportunities; many are not in paid work, and some are on maternity leave.

It may also be that the opportunities for parents and carers to socialise are important. The volunteering is very informal; no training is required, but tailored support is available, and a volunteer coordinator encourages people to help in whatever ways they feel able.

Youth activities and clubs were not always led by parents or carers but funded and organised by partnerships in response to a locally identified need or problem, such as high levels of anti-social behaviour or drug use amongst young people. These activities are led by partnership members, local authority leisure services or local

community organisations, funded to provide activities such as coding, multi sports, cooking and gaming.

In one of the most successful youth activities we came across, the partnership decided to stop funding a local youth group and tackle the issue of anti-social behaviour head-on by engaging a specialist service provider. This organisation aims to motivate young people to participate in community work and learning workshops, with a long-term benefit of helping young people to be more connected with their local communities. It provides immediate incentives by offering points in exchange for work, which can then be used towards funding trips. This group has been much more successful than the previous youth club, rapidly exceeding 100 members, with young people volunteering on projects and receiving rewards.

### **Dad returns to volunteering offering free football for kids**

C is a Big Local area resident who developed and grew his own idea, based on his love for sport, and the need he saw, both in his own child and in the local community. He had volunteered since childhood but had not done so since moving to this Big Local area a few years previously.

He had always been interested in football, playing regularly throughout his childhood and adult life, and when his son turned six, he wanted to get him into a football team. Where C grew up there had been mixed-generation, volunteer-run football clubs that were affordable. In his current area the population felt more transient, with people moving in and out, and the sports opportunities were expensive, run by large for-profit organisations. He wanted to help to build a more community feel, where volunteers and parents come together to help out and make social connections – and he hoped that this in turn might lead to more people wanting to stay in the area.

After speaking to another parent with a son around the same age as his own, who was also keen to play football, C decided to start a club in 2019, volunteer-led and free to local people. Soon after setting it up, C heard about Big Local from another parent who was also a partnership member. With support from the paid workers, he applied for funding and the partnership awarded the club two £1k grants, one for coaching when volunteer coaches dropped out due to COVID and the other for football kit. C said: “These grants helped to keep the club running, without them we would have really struggled.”

Through this and other grants and donations, C has been able to grow the club quickly, in response to the demand for outdoor activities for children, especially during the pandemic. There are now five teams of different age groups, including a girls’ team, and 20 volunteers are helping to run the club. C supports and coordinates the volunteers. He is motivated by seeing young people, parents and volunteers developing, having fun and socialising – especially those who couldn’t afford it otherwise.

## **Support, befriending and wellbeing**

Communities are made of the connections between individuals. In living near someone, we automatically have something in common. The wellbeing of those geographically close to us, whose home we might pass every day, is often more important to us than that of a stranger, and Big Local volunteers are often looking to support their local communities and neighbours through befriending and wellbeing activities.

From the reps' survey we estimate that around 450 volunteering roles are involved in support, befriending or wellbeing. Activities covered a wide range of actions, from informal 'Walk and Talk' sessions open to any adults, to targeted support for vulnerable adults and children (such as 'Treat and Chat', delivering food to socially isolated residents or art or activity packs to families).

Where there are sessions, these are usually relatively informal, bringing individuals together for regular sessions and often directed towards a specific group, such as older people, people with special educational needs or disabilities, and their carers.

Other activities provide befriending, accompanied by more formalised support. For example, an education centre provides support and training to residents for whom English is not their first language, with 24 former participants volunteering to providing a peer support model, helping out several times a week with emotional support, language practice, and befriending current participants.

In the same area there is a Women's Family and Resource Centre (WFRC), with a long-term programme of weekly activities for different groups. Here the aim is to support and befriend women in poverty, preparing for motherhood, and those experiencing domestic violence or in need of food parcels. Big Local has supported the centre, helping it to grow and formalise. Two paid workers are responsible for coordinating 20-25 volunteers, often former clients themselves or students wanting to help out and gain experience.

This type of volunteering is more formalised and, given the vulnerable target group, has a formal recruitment process with interviews and training; there is a minimum commitment for six hours involvement per week, and this can lead to employment opportunities. Taken together, these form part of a range of volunteering opportunities in the Big Local area, offering increasing levels of involvement and skill development, and serving different purposes.

## **Food provision and community cafés**

Providing food is a widespread volunteering activity across Big Local areas, often carried out pre-pandemic through community cafés, with opportunities for people to connect with their communities in an unstructured way. More recently, and particularly since the pandemic, many Big Local partnerships have taken on roles coordinating the distribution of food to local people in need, increasingly conscious that community members are going hungry. The reps estimated that 820 volunteer roles are involved in food provision and community cafés through Big Local.

Although food provision is relatively common, we found that the ways in which partnerships were sharing food varied. Partnerships gave examples including food banks, a community pantry, a community fridge, meals on wheels, and cafés supported by volunteers. In one area food was provided through a discounted breakfast club in a community centre.

One key volunteer we spoke to has a disabled daughter and cannot work; she enjoys volunteering in the café as a way of giving something back and feeling included, and because it has the added benefit that she can bring her daughter along.

In one area there is a 'Life after the Foodbank' project offering weekly cookery classes to show people how to cook and get them together to help build confidence and reduce isolation. These classes are family-orientated, the food supplies are provided free by the partnership, and the food can be taken home. The classes are facilitated by a drama group commissioned by Big Local, and the venue and cooking facilities are all provided by the partnership. Most of the volunteers who support the project are women who are not in paid work, many with low levels of confidence. Some haven't lived in the area long; others are from different generations of the same family, and most are previous beneficiaries of the foodbank.

A 'Treat and Chat' project, started by a volunteer, responded to the problem of social isolation observed when delivering food parcels – another type of project that is visible and very local. Treat and Chat has attracted around 25 local volunteers to support people who are elderly and disabled, delivering food but going beyond this to stay and talk and give back to others within the community.

Food always seems to act as an incentive: some examples of volunteering combine food with another activities, such as repair cafés. For these, volunteers come together to repair items in a space where tea, coffee and cake are also on sale, encouraging people to stay and talk and promoting a sense of belonging, as with shared interests and enthusiasms.

## Key points: Volunteering roles and activities – what works?

- People are attracted to volunteering opportunities through the topic or theme of activity.
- Activities and events attracting the most volunteers are those that are visible and physically embedded in the hyper-local community and which provide low commitment, time-limited ways of getting involved.
- Most consider their volunteering to be of benefit to their local community and value this. They are more likely to associate helping out with a particular activity or organisation than as 'volunteering' per se.
- Volunteers value opportunities to give back and feel connected, through community participation or celebration.
- Many Big Local volunteering activities are characterised by events and activities which help to connect community members and/or have an immediate, visible impact on the local physical environment.
- Litter-picks and environmental activities are successful ways of engaging a large range of community members, with minimal input, and maximal observable impact and reward for participants.
- Sports, crafts, children's activities and special interests are excellent for engaging people with a particular passion or interest in volunteering. This can lead to a sense of belonging, community leadership and the engagement of more volunteers, as well as improving the availability of services and activities in a neighbourhood. They also help to attract a diverse range of volunteers who are not principally motivated by community involvement on its own.
- Support, befriending and wellbeing in (very) local communities provide opportunities to connect community members and are highly valued for their benefits to both volunteers and participants. People who have benefited from these types of services often want to give back by going on to offer peer support, and this can be an effective way to engage vulnerable people in volunteering.
- Food provision and community cafés provide a range of ways for people to volunteer. Food activities are very relatable and valued for both bringing people together and meeting immediate needs.

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# The importance of community hubs

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Community centres and hubs are not universal in Big Local areas. However, a broad overview of the incidence and types of volunteering across Big Local, obtained via the reps' survey alongside interviews, highlighted the critical nature of community hubs, centres or cafés in attracting and supporting volunteers, and involving them in decisions in their community.

## Routes into volunteering

Community hubs were described by partnership members and paid workers as creating footfall, and as places where people can connect through activities with other community members and volunteer organisers. Community centres act as a central focus, where relationships and confidence can be built, and are key to increasing involvement and connecting volunteers with opportunities. A volunteer told us: "the community centre creates relationships between residents, building confidence and encouraging volunteering". A partnership member and volunteer in an area without a community centre told us:

"The Big Local areas that have a bricks and mortar building have more volunteers. It's easier to inform people what's going on if there's space to be face to face with them."

Community hubs allow volunteers to become engaged in different ways; connections can be actively sought by volunteers or cultivated by a worker, partnership member or activity provider. They provide different routes for people to become involved: by hosting volunteer fairs, putting on activities, as places where people can come directly to offer their time, or where progress towards volunteering can be gradual.

Some volunteers told us that they just walked into community centres and asked how they could get involved; others began by participating in activities, then contributing in informal, modest ways (such as stacking chairs and making tea), and ultimately went on to take on more active, defined roles. By contrast, Big Local areas without a community hub find it difficult to hold engagement events and to replicate the value of face-to-face, consistent, familiar contact. A paid worker told us that they find it "very hard to do anything without a space", noting that:

"Motivations to volunteer are usually related to social connections and without a centre this is really tested".

Some Big Local partnerships have been key to maintaining and preserving these community assets and what they represent. In one case study area, the threatened closure of the community hub galvanised community opposition in 2017, led by the Big Local area. This was very successful and created a strong sense of local ownership and loyalty towards the centre. In another case study area, the early focus of the partnership was also saving a community centre from closure. In a third, the consistent funding of groups in community centres has helped to create volunteering roles and opportunities, and they have also funded an extension to the centre itself.

A volunteer who attends a playscheme at one of these centres told us:

"I'd never been to the community centre before, despite living here for four years. It's right in the middle of the estate, people get here on foot. Then they put on the extension, and I heard about it - all the kids know who I am now."

There is also a strong connection between the presence of a local hub and an area's ability to respond to emergency needs in the community. This was particularly evident during the pandemic, when having a local hub proved critical for many areas. We saw many examples of community centres being an important focal point for voluntary emergency food distribution and reducing social isolation during the pandemic.

Community leaders based in community centres often play key roles in recruiting and supporting volunteers. By providing accessible, affordable space, community hubs allow a wide range of activities to take place and for ideas emerging from the community to be followed up. People who hadn't previously thought of volunteering have become involved or been encouraged to develop their ideas for activities through workers and partnership members based in community centres with knowledge of the funding available to residents and of how to apply. We have seen examples of community members who have gone on from being encouraged by community hub workers to start craft groups, yoga groups, forest schools, a range of events, community cinema projects and much more.

Community centres or hubs are key spaces for community activities and services, and tend to be geographically central within a neighbourhood and easily accessible to many residents, reducing potential anxiety about visiting a new space or formalised group. In many instances, the volunteers with whom we spoke had benefitted from the services or activities provided in the centres and wanted to give back to their communities.

### **The importance of a community centre or hub**

D is a familiar face to local residents who visit her local community centre on a regular basis. The centre provides several activities and events, including parent and toddler groups, children's activities and 'knit and natter' groups, as well as a community café. Big Local funding, support and contacts have been used to core-fund the community centre, and for specific activities designed by centre visitors and volunteers. D has been an essential figure in developing interest in volunteering and in coordinating and supporting volunteers. She has worked hard to establish relationships with community members and to encourage

residents to take up volunteering roles related to their interests, skills and resources.

D believes that even the smallest contributions should be viewed as volunteering or giving back to the community. One woman was lacking confidence and did not view herself as able to volunteer. D saw that a weekly commitment might be too much, and suggested the woman try smaller tasks if she felt comfortable, such as stacking chairs or helping to tidy away after play sessions she attended with her children. Over time, the woman's confidence grew to where she saw herself as an active volunteer or helping neighbour. The volunteer said that, without D's support and encouragement, she would never have begun volunteering at the centre.

D says: "I see it through a kind of community development lens – how people just want to be part of something and gain from it".

Although D uses social media and newsletters to advertise opportunities, most volunteers have been recruited through informal methods. She engages with local residents every day at the community centre, providing a range of activities and services she uses regular contact and informal, conversations to build relationships based on trust.

By keeping an eye open for those actively interested in volunteering, as well as residents who aren't or who lack confidence, D has engaged new volunteers in a range of roles at the community centre, some eventually leading to part-time employment. Each has a different role; some take on many different roles, while others focus on specific interests and discrete tasks. Where volunteers express interest in a specific area, D often mediates between residents and the Big Local partnership.

## **How community centres support community decision-making**

For areas with a community centre, such buildings often act as key spaces for distributed decision-making. These buildings were usually established before Big Local was known to community residents. Although funding had often dwindled in the recent past, these spaces have tended to be key spaces for community activities and services accessible to a range of residents. Using these familiar, accessible community spaces can reduce residents' potential anxiety about visiting a new space or formalised group, such as the partnership.

Another benefit of community centres is that residents are often able to observe the 'outcomes' of decision-making processes, in the form of a physical building, facilities, new services or activities. This way residents become more aware of the benefits of Big Local funding and the potential value of becoming involved. One community centre we came across is run by 60 volunteers and a few part-time staff. Part of their offer is 'grow your idea'. A worker from the centre told us:

"We will give someone the support they need to start an idea up, room hire, help with social media, funded by Big Local."

Working this way, the centre helps local residents with the funding of activities and services and residents are able to shape activities in line with their own interests and perceptions of community need. These opportunities raise awareness of Big Local and give residents opportunities to influence how Big Local money is spent, and services are delivered without getting involved in the partnership, or decision-making groups.

In many cases, Big Local-related community centres offer:

- no barriers to access
- chances to influence how Big Local money is spent
- a trusted and safe location to start the volunteering journey
- places for community members to bring forward ideas and try out activities or projects
- support from onsite workers to overcome barriers.

## Key points: the role of community centres

- Community centres create and support relationships with residents, building confidence and encouraging volunteering. This combination of local physical space, funding and support provides some of the best opportunities for residents to start volunteering and begin a journey towards community leadership.
- Community centres and hubs are particularly beneficial for attracting and supporting volunteers and creating community-led volunteering experiences. They are highly visible, allowing people to drop in, and this is the starting point for many volunteers.
- Community centres were important focal points for volunteering, particularly food distribution in the pandemic. They can host a range of activities, attracting community members, and provide spaces for residents to volunteer to run their own activities and recruit more volunteers.
- Partnerships recognise the value of these community assets, and often fund either the centre, or activities based there. They can also provide an income stream with room hire and paid-for activities.
- The regular use of community centres by residents provides a valuable opportunity for community development and increased volunteering, through workers and partnership members growing their relationship with community members.
- Activities provided in local community centres are easy to access, allowing people to see how taking part and being involved feels, while taking things at their own pace. Later, accompanied by sensitive support, people who may not have thought of volunteering may grow their participation, starting with 'helping out' and graduating over time to greater commitment more formal volunteering roles.

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# The roles, skills and time commitment of volunteering

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This section focuses on the volunteers' perceptions of their involvement. Volunteers take on a wide range of roles, requiring different skills, different ways of engaging and differing levels of commitment. As well as their differing requirements, roles can vary depending on what volunteers want to achieve, their reasons for getting involved, how much time they have available, and what they feel they can contribute.

## **Types of volunteer roles, and volunteer time commitment**

The NCVO (2019) categorises the types of volunteering support people give to organisations and there was evidence in our case study areas of Big Local-related volunteering in almost all of the same categories, notably:

- Organising or helping to run an activity or event
- Providing other practical help (for example, helping out at school)
- Leading a club or group, or being a trustee or member of a committee
- Befriending or mentoring
- Getting other people involved in the group, club or organisation
- Offering advice, information or counselling
- Providing transport or driving
- Visiting people (for example, those in need)
- Helping with secretarial, administration or clerical work
- Representing the group, club or organisation at meetings or events.

While the categories are similar to those noted by NCVO nationally, nearly all the Big Local volunteering activity we found was very locally focused, with lots of use of the term 'community' when people described what they did and why.

There were three categories of volunteering where the rates of participation of Big Local volunteers were lower than nationally (although they did appear). These were:

- raising money or taking part in sponsored events
- handling money (for example, as club treasurer)
- campaigning on behalf of the group, club or organisation.

The lower participation in these categories in Big Local areas is probably because all Big Local areas have funding available and the majority are not formally constituted as charities. On top of this, locally trusted organisations (LTOs) handle partnerships' finances. In relation to campaigning, many national organisations with volunteers have a campaigning role and work to address a single issue, and this is not typically the case within the Big Local programme.

Research by the Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC)<sup>8</sup> on volunteering in the UK found that a relatively small proportion of the population – the so-called civic core – is responsible for the bulk of volunteering, charitable giving and civic participation. In other words, a large proportion of volunteering activity is carried out by a minority of individuals. We also found this to be largely true in our Big Local case study areas.

In one Big Local area, we spoke to nine volunteers volunteering at an event. Each had multiple volunteering roles, and two had five or more. Someone we met with the most volunteer roles was a local councillor who volunteers outside of her council work; she is the secretary of a 'friends of the park' group, has a volunteer coordinator role for that group, and is involved in a fundraising committee, the Rotary Club, the organisation of a large local event, and a self-help group.

The amount of time people give links to the type of volunteering they are engaged in. For people starting to volunteer, or returning to it, a low commitment is usually the first step, such as supporting a local event by involving themselves or their children. Typically, volunteering builds from here, as people become willing to make a greater commitment once they are more certain about what they are taking on and that they will enjoy it. In our examples, this included getting involved in organising events or activities or expanding volunteering to support multiple activities.

In some cases – particularly when people were already familiar with volunteering or confident in their skills – the initial approach involved a more regular commitment. For example, people from the so-called civic core may volunteer to be part of a decision-making group, or those with a particular skill or interest might volunteer to lead a sports or craft group. In one case, where a volunteer was less confident in her abilities and in a less stable position in her home life, the ability to step back and start over as a participant was highly valued, making the volunteer feel welcome and secure and helping to restore her confidence.

We can see this type of distribution with one of our Big Local case study areas (see Figure 4). Here, the partnership surveyed members of the community, asking how people wanted to volunteer. The results of this survey show the variation in how

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<sup>8</sup> Mohan, J., & Bulloch, S. (2012) *The idea of a 'civic core': what are the overlaps between charitable giving, volunteering, and civic participation in England and Wales?* Third Sector Research Centre, Working Paper 73.

frequently people wish to volunteer, with the largest number wanting to volunteer periodically, starting from as little as one day per year. As we have already seen, it is also evident that the topic or theme is important, with around a quarter of people willing to volunteer indicating "only if it is something I am really interested in", and around one-fifth willing to offer their help if the volunteering relates to their area of expertise. However, there were a further 11 people who would consider anything, and eight who would like to lead a project, indicating the range of involvement people might be willing to undertake.

### Many people have skills and enthusiasm to offer their community.

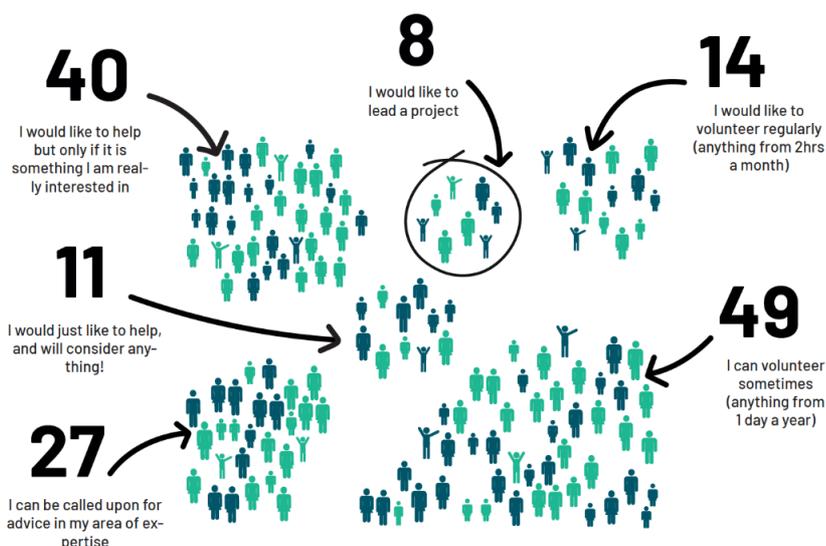


Figure 4: A survey from one Big Local area looking for volunteers (2020). Diagram designed by Luciana Busescu

### How does Big Local activity create volunteering opportunities?

The ways in which volunteers are supported links to how volunteering roles are created, and the reasons why. We found several ways in which volunteers can be linked to partnerships, through four types of action from partnerships, and outlined below in Figure 4.

1. Volunteers can support partnerships directly, either through volunteering directly for the partnership, or through volunteer activities coordinated by partnership member or a paid worker.
2. Big Local partnerships fund activities, which in turn generate volunteering opportunities. This can be either where a volunteer from the community requests partnership funding for a volunteer supported activity, event or programme, or when a linked organisation is given funding for a volunteer supported activity, event or programme.

3. Funding and running a venue or community centre creates volunteering opportunities. Organisations or volunteers can run activities for local residents, with the venue costs subsidised by the partnership, and further volunteers can in turn support the activities.
4. When a Big Local partnership takes a decision to spend money specifically on supporting volunteering in their area, this can involve linking volunteers to organisations with volunteering opportunities by holding a volunteer fair, or by employing a so-called volunteer broker to support and match potential volunteers and organisations – often putting together a database of volunteers, potential volunteers and volunteering opportunities.

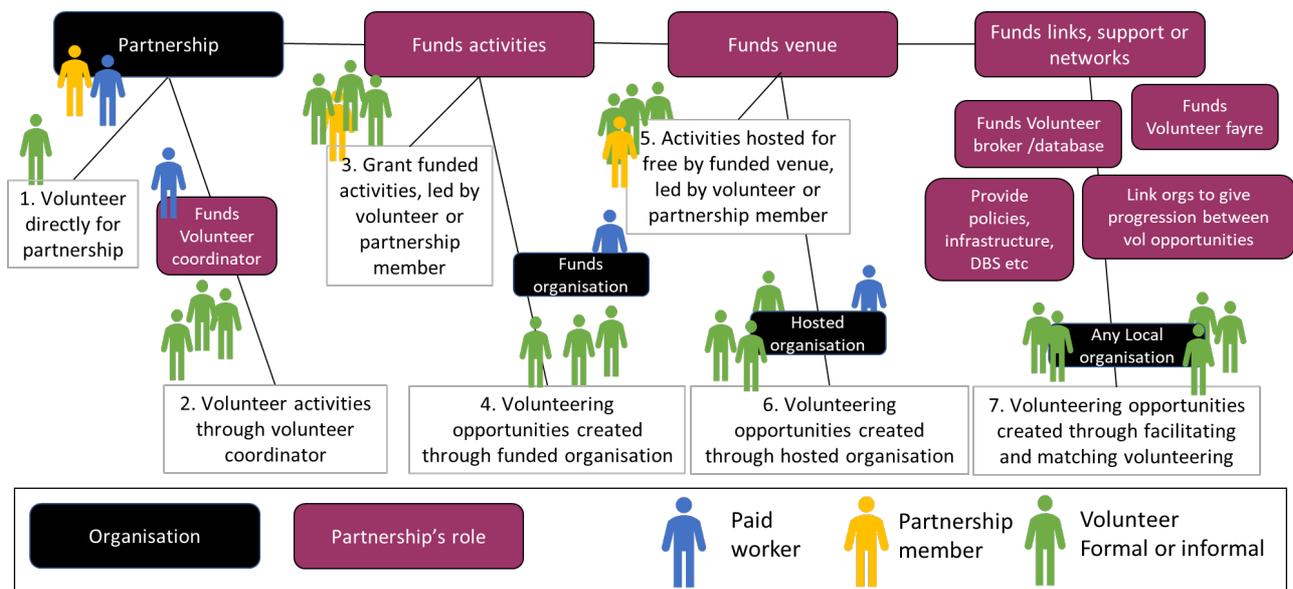


Figure 4: Ways in which volunteers are linked to partnerships.

To make it easier for organisations or residents starting activities to take on volunteers, some partnerships provide support with policies and procedures, DBS checks or other administrative tasks. They also work in partnership with other organisations to create volunteering networks and frameworks, helping volunteers to move between roles in different organisations and access a wider range of opportunities for personal progression.

## **Key points: Volunteering roles, skills and time commitment**

- We found that engaging local people in their communities through volunteering was characteristic of almost every Big Local area and they have been very successful in encouraging people to volunteer, with an estimated 6,500 volunteering roles taken up nationally.
- Big Local volunteers fulfil a variety of roles very similar to the range of volunteering roles nationally, but are generally more locally based, and community focused. There is also much less campaigning and fundraising activity than nationally.
- Volunteers give varying amounts of commitment and involvement, and many hold multiple volunteering roles, often supported and coordinated by paid workers and other volunteers.
- Some roles are directly linked to partnerships, but many are the result of partnership funding, and the work partnerships do to encourage volunteering and community involvement.
- Volunteering is often driven by participation in funded activities, hosted through community venues, and sometimes by partnerships supporting the volunteering infrastructure, in conjunction with other local organisations.
- In over half of the Big Local areas, partnerships fund a paid worker where volunteer coordination is a key part of their role. We found that a specific, dedicated volunteer support or brokerage role was less common, but where this approach has been taken, there tend to be plans to continue with it after Big Local funding ends.

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# Who wants to be a volunteer?

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In this section we consider potential volunteers – how they are engaged in volunteering opportunities and supported to making their volunteering activity successful for both themselves and the organisation.

The volunteers we spoke to were a diverse group of people, from a range of ages, genders, ethnicities, and backgrounds. While we did speak to adults volunteering for the first time, this was the exception rather than the rule. People had usually done some volunteering before and were either returning to it, taking on an additional role, or taking a new step on their volunteering journey.

## Life stages and time

The ages of volunteers we spoke ranged from 12 to over 70. Many mentioned that they had first volunteered in childhood, often linked to the Scout and Guide movements, a parent's volunteering, or a religious or activist organisation.

"At some point when I was quite young, someone helped me. I benefited from that person given up their time, and so I could see the value in it, and wanted to do it myself." (Volunteer)

Volunteering involves a time commitment, and so it is not surprising that the NCVO volunteering survey (2019) found that those age 65 and over were most likely to have volunteered recently. In our interviews, retirement was a key moment when people were looking forward and actively planning to increase their volunteering activity.

We also saw evidence of other life changes that represented opportunities and made more time available, such as reducing work to have children, children leaving home, or a bereavement acting as a spur to take up a new volunteering role. One volunteer told us: "I started volunteering because I started working less hours, so I had time in the evenings."

Caring responsibilities also have an effect; two interviewees were providing long-term care for their chronically ill partners, and another for her child who has significant additional needs. One carer told us how her caring responsibilities made paid work very difficult, but the relative flexibility of volunteering made it possible for her to balance this with her caring commitments and acted as a lifeline and welcome change.

As well as making time available to volunteer, sometimes being a parent acted as a driver to start volunteering – for example, as children's activity group leaders or school governors.

### Seeking community connections

Some volunteers were prompted to volunteer when they moved into a new area, to get to know people and become involved in the local community. This also linked with life stages: those who were recently bereaved or divorced were more likely to be seeking connections through volunteering. One volunteer told us:

"I moved here after I was widowed. I walked into the community centre being nosy, and it went from there."

### The 'civic core' of volunteers

We have already seen that a so-called civic core of people provide a disproportionate amount of volunteering. In common with national research,<sup>9</sup> we found that volunteers were more likely to be women, and from higher socioeconomic groups. These volunteers, sometimes with five or six volunteering roles, told us that they regularly continued to get involved with new things. We also found examples of the children of these volunteers becoming involved in volunteering.

Workers, volunteers and partnership members saw this interconnectedness and family culture or habit of volunteering as an asset. They also thought that partnerships looking for support should not be intimidated to approach someone who is already involved in a number of volunteer activities. These people are already motivated to volunteer, may have relevant experience, and their participation in other activities may not be a barrier to them taking on a new role.

More than one person volunteering echoed what one volunteer told us: "If you want something done, you should ask a busy person".

### The enthusiasts

Through the topics for volunteering activities, particular themes were identified which attract volunteers through their interests. We found this to be particularly true for male volunteers, through sports, environmental activities, and hands on activities like 'men's shed' groups and a repair café.

While some people volunteer through their interests simply for their own enjoyment of the activity, many are also motivated to share their interests with others and pass on their skills – for example, teaching children to code, or sharing crafting skills.

In all types of volunteering, new volunteers were often friends of existing volunteers, and this is particularly true of so-called enthusiast volunteers, with connections to people with similar interests they are able to help draw into volunteering.

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<sup>9</sup> Mohan, J., & Bulloch, S. (2012) *The idea of a 'civic core': what are the overlaps between charitable giving, volunteering, and civic participation in England and Wales?* Third Sector Research Centre, Working Paper 73.

## Religion and philosophy

Faith and philosophy of life were drivers for a lot of the volunteers we spoke to, with the value and importance of helping others and being involved in your community upheld by many religions.

A volunteer who wasn't religious described his motivation:

"It's part of a philosophy of life."

In a predominantly Muslim area, most of the volunteers discussed how their faith and connection to the mosque was a driver for their volunteering.

More than one Big Local volunteer coordinator found that churches in their area were a good source of volunteers, while also providing volunteering opportunities and acting as community centres in themselves – particularly for food banks.

Some volunteer coordinators considered religion to be both a positive and a challenge; they were concerned that potential volunteers can be uncomfortable in religious buildings, and this may act as a barrier when trying to include all parts of the community.

## Former beneficiaries

Several people we spoke to became volunteers as part of a progression – from being supported by an organisation or taking part in an activity, to becoming a supporter or volunteer. These people have been helped, gained a sense of belonging and confidence, and in turn wanted to become helpers and share their experience with others.

## Attracting and engaging volunteers

Volunteers told us that most attractive initial volunteering opportunities are immediate, rewarding, and hyper-local, as illustrated by the previous discussion about the popularity of environmental activities or litter-picking, as ways to get people involved.

Volunteers, volunteer coordinators and reps all recommended attracting new volunteers by starting with a small, time-limited commitment to avoid the fear of being overcommitted, telling us "they don't want to be trapped into volunteering," and may want to feel that they can step away.

However, although informal volunteering can be attractive, it is not always possible or appropriate. More formal structures are important to keep volunteers and participants safe for safeguarding purposes, for particular skills, or for ensuring the reliable delivery of a regular activity.

As noted earlier, people with passionate interests, like sports, crafts, and the outdoors, are often willing to volunteer linked to their passion, and more likely to run these activities and seek funding. A volunteer and volunteer coordinator told us: "People don't put their hand up to be a general volunteer, you have to spark something in them." With activities that people find valuable and interesting, such

as a repair café, the experience of the organiser indicated that large-scale promotion was unnecessary. His advice was: “Build it and they will come”.

“Much of what happens when applying and promoting resident-led approaches in Big Local Areas is more about facilitating or encouraging informal social action, and people doing what they enjoy that aligns with their individual skills, talents, abilities, resources and time. As such they don’t require the sometimes arduous or labour-intensive processes involved in formal volunteering.” (Big Local Rep)

Reps suggested a focus on the activities that draw people in, rather than particular roles or the notion of volunteering. Informal volunteering can be a good way to attract people who might not think of volunteering otherwise.

For some the term ‘volunteer’ itself has a stigma attached to it – they don’t want to be seen as a so-called do-gooder, and for them the term feels as though it describes someone else who isn’t them. This may be particularly true of people without a history of volunteer involvement, and who are not middle class.

Formal volunteering processes and recruitment are seen as a barrier to engaging people who many not want to identify as volunteers but are motivated to help others and get involved in their communities. A volunteer coordinator told us: “The trouble is that people don’t know where to start. They don’t have the right words.”

“I have often witnessed ‘formal volunteering processes’ be a barrier to participation and involvement, whereas less formal social action and asset-based community development can be far more attractive and beneficial in terms of developing and maintaining stronger communities with richer and more sustainable participation of local people.” (Big Local Rep)

As already noted, there is often a gradual shift from participating in an activity to volunteering, as confidence and involvement grows, with no particular ‘moment’ when a person becomes a volunteer. To support this process, keeping things informal and flexible is important for keeping participants engaged. This is true for the step from participant to volunteer, and for further steps involving higher levels of commitment.

As we have also seen, paid workers or community leaders, particularly in community centres, were able to develop relationships with community members, and gauge the point at which people were ready to take the next step. One said:

“Ideally, you need a paid worker or coordinator who is a force of nature”.

Many of the volunteers we spoke to related their volunteering back to an individual who had made the effort to get to know them and encouraged them to take the first steps to volunteering, through their own idea or involvement in an activity. In some cases, these interactions were memorable to the volunteers even years later. One volunteer coordinator was clearly conscious of this, and said that the way to encourage engagement to the next level was to build trust. In this way, he had encouraged volunteers to take on leadership and coordination roles.

There exists widespread use of newsletters, social media, and digital communication channels to attract volunteers. However, the most successful

method is usually word of mouth – either from a friend or family member or someone associated with Big Local who has developed trust and confidence with the person volunteering. Marketing and comms have been successfully used to highlight to local residents the changes and benefits Big Local volunteers bring to the community and, by making this visible, to attract more volunteers.

External perceptions of organisations are also important – a lack of trust or a poor reputation can act as a barrier to people committing their time, while being part of something positive is understandably appealing to volunteers.

There was one particular challenge identified by nearly all Big Local areas: getting new people to become involved in decision-making or governance groups. While groups were sometimes successful in attracting the so-called civic core and residents familiar with formal meetings and language, it was particularly difficult to engage residents unfamiliar with these things. This is explored in more detail in the later discussion of volunteering as a route to distribute decision-making.

## **Reaching a wider range of volunteers**

“The biggest challenge is getting the diversity in the community volunteers. And how we can address that going further. It's something we're conscious of.”  
(partnership member)

We are interested in Big Local areas' success in engaging a wide and diverse range of volunteers to identify and share successful strategies. Reps reported challenges in attracting volunteers for specific activities (57 areas) and the recruitment of particular groups – for example, young people, ethnic minorities, neurodiverse people, or individuals from specific neighbourhood areas (59 areas). Big Local reps described a range of examples of volunteering activities that have been successful in attracting volunteers from underrepresented groups.

In one area, for example, a community bike club has been very successful in engaging a diverse range of volunteers. The club has more than 60 members, originally from 15 different countries; there is an almost even split of men and women, and the age gap between the youngest and eldest members is 50 years.

Reps also cited successful examples of engaging young people in volunteering, such as a youth-targeted mental health campaign, and a young person's environmental project, led by the YMCA, restoring graves in a local cemetery.

Many areas also mentioned that community gardens attract interest from volunteers from a range of backgrounds. One rep told us that growing things outdoors in a community allotment made the activity attractive to volunteers who had experienced poor mental health, and who benefitted from the activity immensely.

In some areas, vulnerable groups have been target groups for environmental activities. The target groups have included people recovering from addictions, those looking to move on from a history of offending, people with poor mental health, people with learning disabilities and those with low confidence.

Gendered groups may attract volunteers who might not otherwise step forward. This is partly about creating a safe space for people, and partly about targeted people with specific, traditionally gendered interests. So-called men's sheds, for example, have been particularly successful in engaging elderly and isolated men, and women's groups have had more success in some areas than mixed gender groups in attracting women from ethnic minorities.

Food and cooking have also proved to be good means of reaching a wide range of groups. In one area, a lunch club project led by Mencap involved young disabled adults in learning about food preparation and waiting tables; in others, food delivery and preparation for meals-on-wheels have included a range of people from different ethnicities, with asylum seekers being volunteering with at least three of these.

## **What volunteers want and need**

Volunteers need to feel that their efforts are noticed and appreciated. A volunteer coordinator warned:

"Volunteers need someone to be routinely thanking them, for every time they show up, and checking in with them. It needs to be someone's job to say thank you and ask if they are ok to do it next week. Make sure they aren't taken for granted."

And most volunteers we spoke to told us that the support they wanted was to be acknowledged and thanked.

The need for good communication is clearly critical. A volunteer and volunteer coordinator said: "it is the constant keeping-in-touch that really helps to retain volunteers, asking them if sessions have run well, or if they need anything."

A volunteer told us:

"I felt valued, because I had 1-1 support, volunteers often don't get that, some feel like just a body making something happen. Try and get to know volunteers. If they don't come, it's not 'we've lost a volunteer', ask 'why aren't they coming?'"

Communication like this helps to remove barriers and head off emerging problems, as well as making volunteers feel safe and seen. A worker told us about a volunteer who was causing delays and issues in supporting a meals-on-wheels service. A conversation with the volunteer uncovered that she found it very sad leaving people alone so quickly after delivering the meals, having seen how much they needed contact. The paid worker was able to offer the volunteer an alternative role as a befriender, describing it as a move-them-or-lose-them situation, which ended up being beneficial to both parties.

Recognition can also be important to volunteers. One worker said: "Giving volunteers a t-shirt sets them apart, makes them feel special and rewards their efforts." Tea, biscuits, and shared food were also advocated as ways of showing volunteers appreciation.

One partnership member stressed the importance of having all the right elements – such as expenses forms – in place and ready, even for informal volunteering, so people don't start to feel put upon or out of pocket and wonder what they've taken on. "We try to anticipate what might come up or be an obstacle, then clear the pathway," they said.

Indeed, part of acknowledging and valuing volunteers is making sure that their time is used well. A coordinator told us: "Volunteers feel devalued if they turn up and can't be used". She advocated scheduling to prevent boredom and dissatisfaction.

In resident-led programmes, many volunteers and volunteer coordinators also told us that they ask volunteers for advice and input when setting up events and volunteering activities. The issues of informality and commitment were also raised again. Flexibility can be important for more vulnerable volunteers while their confidence is still growing, but it can also be important for younger volunteers who feel unable to make long term commitments. One told us:

"It's about how you can create an environment where people can drop in and out, not commit. For me it's about having input but on my own terms."

The NVCO survey of volunteers (2019) found varying degrees of formality in processes surrounding the induction and management of volunteers, and that interviews before taking on volunteering roles and role-specific training were not common. This is also true of volunteering with Big Local, wherein the level of formality tends to be linked to the role of the coordinator – that is, which organisation they work for, and the type of volunteering activity they engage in. It did not seem to be significant whether the coordinator themselves was paid or a volunteer.

## **What do volunteers get out of it?**

Volunteering, by definition, requires volunteers to give their time and, just as there are ranges of volunteers and of volunteering opportunities, there is a range of motivations and (both sought and unsought) benefits to volunteering. As one volunteer said: "An unexpected bonus of volunteering has been a sense of purpose and fulfilment. I've made new friendships, learnt new skills – I could go on."

### **Enjoyment and Identity**

The different volunteers we spoke to outside of the partnership really valued their volunteering experience. A young person who volunteered in the community centre said:

"I get some confidence from this. And I love it when you run an activity and a child is smiling".

For some people interviewed, volunteering had become a core part of their identity, and the main thing they committed their time to. One volunteer said: "Volunteering changed my life.....There is no feeling like it!".

### **Feeling more connected to community**

The Big Local volunteers we spoke to frequently mentioned community. Some talked about how their local connections were strengthened through their volunteering. One volunteer, who had progressed to paid work as a volunteer coordinator, said:

“I feel a part of everything. My friends in the community are closer than family”.

Another volunteer – a parent supporting children’s sports – valued his increased connection to the community, but also the links he was making for the children themselves. “Sports clubs are critical to community. It’s so important to use sports clubs as a way into communities,” he said.

Others talked about their affection for their community. A volunteer explained: “I love helping and I love the community.” And a community centre volunteer said explicitly that they volunteer because they “care about the community”.

Volunteers also told us that their involvement helped them make more community connections generally. A volunteer who had received Big Local funding for a project said: “You end up knowing a lot of people as a volunteer,” and a partnership member and volunteer said: “I like the connections I’ve made with other people that are doing similar work.” Another commented that “the networking is good.”

### **Combatting loneliness and isolation**

Some of the volunteers seeking community connections were initially lonely or isolated. Participation in volunteering was beneficial for people in that it provided them with more human contact and a sense of purpose. A volunteer told us:

“It’s addictive! It’s something that becomes part of you. Volunteering has saved my life”.

We also found volunteers looking to the community in the absence of family connections. One younger resident who volunteered for an oral history project was keen to use her professional skills, and said:

“I don’t have grandparents anymore, it’s nice to have people in your life who are older... I wanted to give something back.”

### **Learning skills**

Volunteers gain skills through volunteering, both directly and indirectly. In some cases these are softer skills, such as team working and punctuality; in others, they are more specific, such as IT and record-keeping or horticultural skills. One support centre provides training for local residents in areas such as English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), literacy and digital skills, health and wellbeing advice, and community education. Supported by Big Local, 24 former participants in this area act as volunteers, helping out many times each week with emotional support, language practice, and befriending current participants.

In other examples, volunteers learn skills from one another, particularly in practical activities like in crafting and sports.

## Progression into employment

The experience of volunteering can build and restore individuals' confidence and self-worth sufficiently to make them consider applying for work – especially when they are supported and encouraged by Big Local workers, partnership members and fellow volunteers, who recognise and point out their strengths. Volunteering can also give people references reflecting what they have achieved that they can take to interviews, even though they may never have been in formal employment.

In some areas, the focus on employment can be more explicit, offering training and help to obtain the necessary paperwork. In one area we spoke to, paid workers provide or will organise training on project management, monitoring and administration, budget and money management and equality and diversity training, helping to professionalise volunteering and enhancing employability.

### **A job and benefits for the whole family**

M has a big family, with children from five years old to their mid-twenties. She has lived on the same estate for 13 years, and described it in the past as being very run down, with lots of kids "with attitudes" hanging about with nowhere to go, creating a bad atmosphere. She and her children didn't visit the community centre which she said looked "ready to be demolished".

Renovations by the Big Local partnership, working with the community, transformed the centre, and in 2019 M came to take part in some classes. Being side-by-side with her neighbours at classes made it easier to start conversations and be in touch. From here, M was encouraged by the partnership chair to become more involved.

Over time, she received her induction from the partnership chair, covering everything she needed to know, but this was kept very informal. She was not given a specific volunteering role and "was just able to slot in – there's always plenty to do." Meanwhile, her older sons received practical support from the paid workers and partnership members to set up homes on their own and find jobs.

M started by helping with the playscheme – a good fit for her youngest child – and as her confidence grew, her involvement increased, and she was encouraged to become a partnership member. Eventually she was persuaded to think about employment, which she hadn't considered before. With support M has since trained and started work as a domiciliary care worker. Paid Big Local workers helped her to get the necessary ID, carried out practice interviews with her, and provided a reference based on her volunteering experience. She started by working just a few hours per week, increasing to 30-40 hours, and reportedly loves it.

In terms of what she has gained, M feels she has "bettered herself", and that the whole family has benefited through involvement with the community centre and related services. M says: "I've received lots of moral support as well as practical help".

The whole family's sphere of activity has changed significantly as a result of M's work. M's sons now pick and choose what they want to do more and feel confident to go beyond the immediate neighbourhood, to other community centres in the area for activities such as football. M says: "Big Local has opened everything up; it feels safer and more secure. You can come in and chat, it's open to everyone."

## **Progression towards partnership membership and decision-making**

We came across many examples of partnership members who started their Big Local journeys as volunteers with ideas for a funded activity. Often their passion for a particular project was enough to involve them in decision-making, and as they became more involved, to becoming partnership members. One partnership member was attracted to Big Local through his involvement in a youth group, and his passion for issues facing young people in the area. This led to him joining the partnership, and he told us:

"When I joined, it was all a bit new to me. As I've gone to the meetings and attended more, I've gained more confidence. I didn't know how to make a proper budget plan before but now I do. It's been a massive learning experience, especially since I joined during the COVID situation. But we're still going strong. There are more older people on the board. So, I try to get younger people on board and interested in what we do and the projects we have going on."

A volunteer in another area who went on to become a partnership member feels very much part of things and confident enough to bring ideas forward and make suggestions. Big Local is planning to open a shop in the community centre, and she is keen to help with planning and running it because she understands how it feels trying to feed a family on benefits, and has ideas about how she can help Big Local do a good job.

In three of the case study areas, volunteers for the partnership had increased their involvement, to the point where they eventually became paid employees of the partnership. But progression was not an aim for all volunteers – for some people, a small level of involvement, or just dipping in and out, was what they wanted and needed from volunteering.

"Who defines what progression is? People will volunteer while it meets a need for them. If it contributes to them, it adds value to them. It doesn't matter how little. The progression can be really little. The biggest community leadership can be the undercover stuff." (Big Local rep)

## Key points: Who wants to be a volunteer?

Volunteers in Big Local are drawn from a wide and diverse pool of community members. We found that some groups of people more likely to take up volunteering, including people who:

- have increased time due to a major life change
- are seeking a community connection due to moving to the area or feeling isolated
- are already committed to volunteering and have other roles
- have an interest or enthusiasm for a particular topic or activity
- have a religion or philosophy that values community and helping others
- have benefitted from volunteering or from the work of an organisation
- have shifted over time from being participants or beneficiaries of voluntary work to becoming volunteers themselves.

Targeted volunteer opportunities can help bring a wider range of volunteers on board; examples include environmental volunteering, gendered groups and cycling.

Volunteers want recognition and regular communication, and value recognition and acknowledgement of their contribution. It also helps to anticipate the needs of volunteers by considering things like expenses in advance, so they aren't out of pocket, and to make sure that there are tasks available when they are asked to come along.

People benefit from volunteering in several ways, linked to their needs and the values that made them volunteer in the first place. Most volunteers we spoke to really enjoyed their volunteering activities, despite the demands on them, and valued how it connects them to their communities.

Volunteers can progress as they gain confidence and take on roles with increasing levels of responsibility, including taking part in decision-making.

Sometimes progression is something a volunteer is seeking (for example, if they want to gain employment or become more active in community leadership and decision-making). But for some volunteers, progression is neither wanted or needed; their contribution is still valuable, and they appreciate deciding for themselves how much involvement is right for them.

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# What works in working with volunteers

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Partnership members told us how community participation through volunteering is helping them achieve their Big Local outcomes. But volunteers and partnerships also described how this is not always easy. In this section, we try to share the learning of partnerships and local organisations in successfully supporting and managing volunteers.

Partnerships and organisations frequently mentioned the challenges of the time, capacity and skills required to manage a team of volunteers successfully. One Big Local rep observed:

“Some of the team are so busy they are trapped in the paradoxical situation where it is quicker and easier in the short-term to do things themselves than delegate or co-deliver – thereby building in a potential lack of capacity for the future.”

Complicating factors in supporting volunteers are the presenting needs and characteristics of the volunteers. For people volunteering as an alternative to paid work, the barriers to paid work can also be barriers to successful volunteering. For example, in recruiting volunteers to support an accessible food store in one Big Local area, the partnership found that eight out of 10 of the volunteers had “challenging needs” to be considered themselves.

Some partnership members mentioned persuading friends and family to help out; they didn’t see this as volunteering, and felt it reduced the administrative burden and meant less volunteer support was required. The level of input that can be required was highlighted by the chief officer of a nursery and family centre that provides volunteering opportunities. She told us:

“Lots of public and private sector people don’t realise that running a bank of volunteers has a huge cost. Someone has to take responsibility for volunteers, usually a paid member of staff. I have to provide policy and procedures, safeguarding training and more. We treat a volunteer as an employee. We give them an induction and a clear but informal contract of expectations. There are always going to be problems. We upskill the whole organisation to be able to manage conflict. And we have been really successful in helping people use volunteering as a steppingstone to work.”

We found that events generally need a designated organiser – frequently a paid worker – coordinating the different ways in which volunteers are involved, such as running stalls, helping with food and drinks, cleaning up and preparing. This was true of almost all voluntary activity; even where the support and organisational roles

are not paid or fully formalised, some forms of leadership, guidance and support for volunteers is necessary.

There were two instances of organisations using technology to support the coordination of volunteers. One very tech-savvy volunteer, arranging volunteers to support coding classes for kids, created their own scheduling tool for people who were volunteering. Using the tool, people could sign up to volunteer during particular slots and find out where and when they were needed without needing to have a conversation with coordinators.

Another volunteer used a customised app for volunteers and organisations as a volunteer-management tool. The app supported volunteer profiles, applications, training, scheduling, matching and feedback. They reported that it also reduces the amount of necessary paperwork surrounding volunteering, and is also an interactive communication and reporting tool.

### Who coordinates and supports volunteers?

Reps told us that in almost all Big Local areas (142 of 150) there is some facility for supporting non-partnership volunteers. Partnerships have multiple ways of supporting volunteers, and more than half (84) had more than one person or organisation supporting volunteers.



Figure 5: Organisations supporting volunteers (Rep survey)

Partnerships supported volunteers through their paid workers in 57 per cent of Big Local areas, and locally trusted organisations (LTOs) – which support partnerships – provide volunteer support in 17 per cent of areas. Other local organisations support volunteers in around half of the areas, and in approximately one-third of areas, partnership members support volunteers themselves.

Reps were also asked if partnerships had a specific volunteer-support role, such as a coordinator, broker, or manager. One in six of Big Local areas (24) did; of those

areas with a specific volunteer support role, 19 have plans to retain the volunteer support role when Big Local funding ends in 2026.

## Matching and Brokerage

If a partnership wants to increase community participation through volunteering, members need to find both volunteers and a range of suitable volunteering roles for them.

In one case study area, the partnership used a survey to contact residents and ask if they wanted to volunteer. Around 150 people responded to say that they would like to volunteer.<sup>10</sup> The partnership's idea was to look for volunteering roles once the survey was complete. However, having stimulated interest, the partnership found it a challenge to find the appropriate volunteering activities for these community members. The number of volunteers was higher than expected, and they were unsure about how to go about successfully matching the volunteers into new opportunities.

A rep who was involved told us:

"Early on in our journey there was a large recruitment drive – with no projects/roles for volunteers to take on. This led to dissatisfaction from the volunteers. If we do not have a specific role lined up for a volunteer, we ask them to join our regular activities, so that they are able to see where they see themselves fitting in and adding to the offer. A person-centred approach seems to work best!"

A solution for one partnership was a volunteering fair in the community centre, inviting both organisations seeking volunteers and local residents. This introduced both sides to each other with limited need for resource from the partnership, and was successful in matching volunteers to organisations.

However, not all volunteers have a clear idea of what they want to do or are ready to approach an organisation or activity leader. We have already noted that people are often attracted to volunteering by a friendly, approachable person – someone who shows an interest in them and gives them confidence, and often someone they get to know over time at a community centre. Guiding people into volunteering in this way can include prompting the potential volunteer to identify their own strengths, discover their interests, and encourage them to push themselves by showing confidence in them. A paid worker described this process as a negotiation, finding out what people want, and where they might be willing and able to take extra responsibilities – and what support they may need along the way.

In a community centre, a worker is likely to have some roles available to them, but may not know the full range of volunteer roles available with other local organisations. Enabling this may require networking and the pooling of information between organisations. In one area, a consortium has been formed of 10 local organisations, making it possible to pool opportunities and suggest a range to

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<sup>10</sup> The same survey as referred to in the 'Volunteering roles, skills and time commitment' section (see Figure 6 in the following section).

potential volunteers, and avoiding competition for volunteers between organisations.

Some volunteer coordinators work with other organisations to place volunteers effectively. We found a strong theme of bespoke matching of volunteers to volunteer activities as a good way to increase volunteering and make successful placements. One partnership member observed that the better the fit between volunteer and the volunteer role, the better the chance of retaining and possibly developing them further. Beyond this, happy volunteers contribute to a good reputation, bringing other people along and increasing volunteering without the need for extra marketing.

In one area we contacted a volunteer broker who actively sources volunteers and volunteering opportunities and matches them appropriately, offering support both to organisations to help them develop best practices for working with volunteers, and for volunteers themselves to help them progress between volunteering opportunities. Both volunteer-broker and volunteer-coordination roles require time and funding from partnerships to manage. Plus, the essential skills are not always easy to find – brokers need to be able to create successful relationships with community members, and also understand the governance and priorities of organisations.

### **Skilful brokerage of volunteers and opportunities**

The brokerage model in a Big Local area can be very successful in stimulating volunteering. In 2017, work was undertaken by one Big Local partnership to better understand the needs of the area, and how to increase community participation and volunteering. The partnership and their paid community engagement officer carried out a mapping exercise of community groups, community centres, charities, and social businesses, establishing:

- the needs of each group/organisation or individual resident;
- who they were already linked with or were aware of;
- if they had paid workers or a specific paid/unpaid volunteer coordinator;
- if they needed volunteers or were interested in volunteering locally.

Results indicated some gaps, which were opportunities for the partnership to take some leadership in linking, supporting, and developing volunteering locally and following some community conversations. The partnership decided to create a brokerage role, and the person who filled it now manages a bank of volunteers and volunteer opportunities, working with local organisations to identify and help create volunteering roles.

In the first instance, organisations sign up, completing forms describing the type of activities they want help with, support currently provided by any paid workers, and the policies and training they have in place. The broker can advise organisations on policies and procedures, and facilitate checks and references

where necessary; however, the responsibility for the volunteer themselves is with the hosting organisation.

Next, the broker looks for volunteers and meets them personally, finding out what they want to do and hope to gain from volunteering. She also explains about Big Local and what it does. She finds that volunteers come from various stages of life; some are younger people leaving college, particularly those with special educational needs; others are older, retired people wishing to stay active; and, more recently, some are people who were furloughed from work during the pandemic. She says: "People tend to come with ideas about what they want to do and it's linked to what they want from the experience. If they're looking for confidence and skills as steps to employment, they need a more formal volunteering opportunity. If a young person wants to learn skills and leadership and gain UCAS points, they might volunteer at a homework club".

The broker stresses the importance of recognising people as individuals; she needs to be good at placing people in appropriate openings and recognising where they may need extra care and nurturing. The support a volunteer gets from an organisation is essential to making placements work, as is the balance between formality and informality, in order to ensure people are kept safe and have accountability.

Overall, the broker acts as an intermediary, helping to "nurse" people, finding appropriate roles, and stepping in if there is conflict or concern. Volunteers remain in touch with her, and after a few weeks she carries out a review to see if things are going well, allowing the volunteer to change their mind and withdraw if they wish. She matches people to strategic and decision-making roles, as well as to more hands-on opportunities.

Recently, the broker has also been working closely with the local volunteer centre, run by Council for Voluntary Service (CVS), encouraging organisations to take up training, accreditation, and support. The brokerage scheme and volunteer centre have learned from each other, with the volunteer centre adjusting their offer in response to feedback, and the brokerage scheme stepping in to provide customised or hyper-local support where needed.

## **Policies and Procedures**

Policies and procedures can be vital for safeguarding volunteers, helping to manage expectations and also to help avoid potential conflict. Many partnerships and unpaid coordinators found it difficult to balance the risk of involving volunteers because they were worried about were worried about, as they put it, health and safety. A paid worker in one organisation said: "the responsibility scares people". The worker estimated that they had 28 policies in place because of the sensitivity of their work and the requirements of funders, but told us that often inexperienced coordinators were too cautious:

"It takes a boldness and level of skill to decide to take a light touch with policy. There is guidance and then there is the law. It is often best for volunteers to have as

little policy as possible, within reason. Do you need it? Is it relevant to us? It moves us away from adopting excessive policies wholesale.”

On the other hand, volunteer coordinators spoke of how useful policies can be in managing volunteer behaviour. One said:

“I like a policy, you can hide behind it and blame the policy, while still being courteous and kind to your volunteers.”

Most volunteer coordinators had adapted policies and procedures from elsewhere. The Repair Café network provides them, along with many sports organisations; several partnerships obtain policy and procedures through their LTOs, and other versions are available online. Although it is not hard to get hold of policies, a coordinator said:

“You need the ability to take it, read it, fully understand the implications, tweak it, and own it. Then it can go in your drawer.”

We have seen how the volunteer-broker model helps with advice on policies and procedure and aligning them with local requirements. In some areas, the LTO is the council for voluntary service or CVS and provides support to local organisations through their volunteer centre. In one area, local organisations including Big Local work as a consortium, developing shared paperwork and guidance and resources for volunteers. This collaboration supports a wider range of volunteering opportunities, encouraging different interests, some leading to training and possible employment. The consortium’s organisations provide training accreditation – for example, in food hygiene, paediatric first aid, and social care. They also told us that bringing accreditors to the community hub rather than expecting people to travel to an accreditation centre helps to limit volunteer dropout. This joined-up working brings benefits for volunteers and for organisations supporting volunteers, in some instances leading to job opportunities for volunteers. A paid worker told us:

“We are having a bit of a care-in-the-community kick at the moment. Some of the people receiving care in our community aren’t getting the care they need, and volunteers are picking up the brunt. We are working with the LTO and a training organisation to train local people in care, so we can provide our own care in our own community. We will have better quality care if we deliver it ourselves and it means jobs and income for local people.”

## **Key points: What works in working with volunteers**

- Partnerships create volunteering opportunities, or work with other organisations to create opportunities to provide benefit to community members, in response to community demand and to create a greater community participation and ownership. Informal volunteering, and a flexible pathway for volunteers, help in attracting and retaining volunteers.
- Leadership, guidance and support – both formal and informal – are critical for successful working with volunteers.
- The burden on small and larger organisations of managing volunteers should not be underestimated. In some cases, this is because of the need for safeguarding measures, volunteer induction and training; in others it is because the volunteers themselves have specific needs to consider.
- In most cases working with volunteers requires support and management from a volunteer coordinator, paid or unpaid. Best practice involves matching volunteers to opportunities carefully – and having opportunities ready and available for them.
- Brokerage can be very successful in matching volunteers and opportunities, but it does require skills, resources and local knowledge.
- Policies and procedures are important, but partnerships and volunteers say these should be customised to be as light-touch as possible, so as not to put volunteers off, or limit activity.

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# Volunteering as a route to distributing decision-making

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Instead of giving money to local governments or organisations, Big Local aims to shift power to communities by giving residents both the money they need and the control over how to spend it. Sharing the decision-making about resources across local communities is a key aim of the Big Local programme. Our research looked at the influence of volunteering on increasing the involvement of the wider community, to explore the links being made (or that could be made) to involve the community in decision-making. Do volunteers engage more, or differently to other community members in decision-making processes and, if so, in what ways?

“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” (Big Local hypothesis).

Across the 150 areas, there are over 1,600 local residents involved in Big Local partnerships, deciding how the £1.15 million should be spent in their neighbourhoods. These 1,600 residents are the partnership members, but the aim is to share the decision-making power widely in the community. Local Trust has carried out research into how power and decision making have happened in partnerships in Big Local (2020).<sup>11</sup> The findings are distilled in the diagram below.

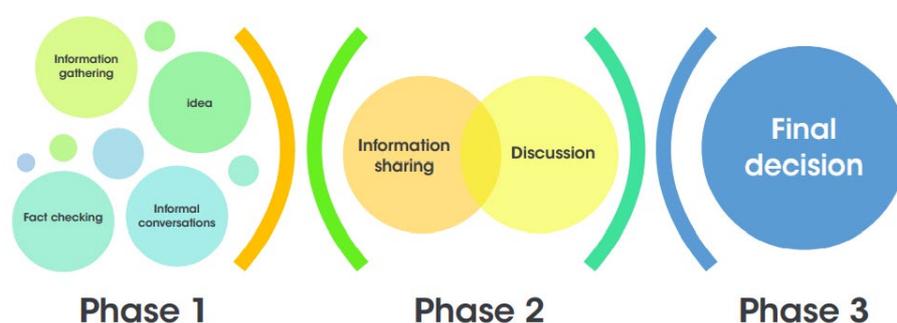


Figure 6: Highlighting three phases of the decision-making process within partnerships

In our research we found that volunteers who were community residents rather than part of partnerships can also be involved in each stage of this process. Volunteers have often built relationships with people within partnerships and associated

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<sup>11</sup> *Power in our hands: An inquiry into resident-led decision making in the Big Local programme*, Big Local, 2020.

organisations. This means that the mechanisms of involvement available to volunteers were similar to, or the same as, the general community. However, their opportunities to input – and the likelihood of them doing so and being heard – were greater than for those who don't volunteer.

The majority of volunteers we spoke to did not always recognise that they were volunteering for Big Local or for the partnership, and were more likely to recognise the name of the organisation or activity that they were working with. They were likely, however, to recognise that they were volunteering to support their local area.

They were also likely to have built a relationship with a coordinator or paid worker linked to the partnership, and communication through this route was the most frequent way that volunteers became involved. Many volunteers work alongside partnership members who also volunteer directly for activities (more on this later), enabling volunteers to share their views and influence decision-makers without having to attend meetings.

### Subgroups, and volunteers directly involved in decision-making

One of the most obvious ways to involve volunteers outside of partnerships in decision-making is through subgroups. Subgroups of partnerships have a focus on one theme or particular interest for which they take responsibility. Subgroups usually meet regularly and advise partnerships on decisions to take. These groups may be less formal than partnership meetings and closely linked to volunteer interests, and so can be a chance to involve a wider group of residents in decision making.

A rep told us: "The strong task groups they have set up have one or two partner members and then a number of regular volunteers, who tend to be longer term supporters of the activity or initiative - for example allotment, men in sheds, coffee and IT, pétanque [boules] club."

In a different area, the rep said: "A less formal subcommittee is seeing a much higher level of engagement, and a much more diverse demographic."

One of the case study areas also has small decision-making groups, but they work slightly differently. They are more focused on project delivery; indeed it could be suggested that there is a fourth phase of decision-making involving decisions made at the implementation phase about how allocated resources should be used in practice, (see Figure 7).

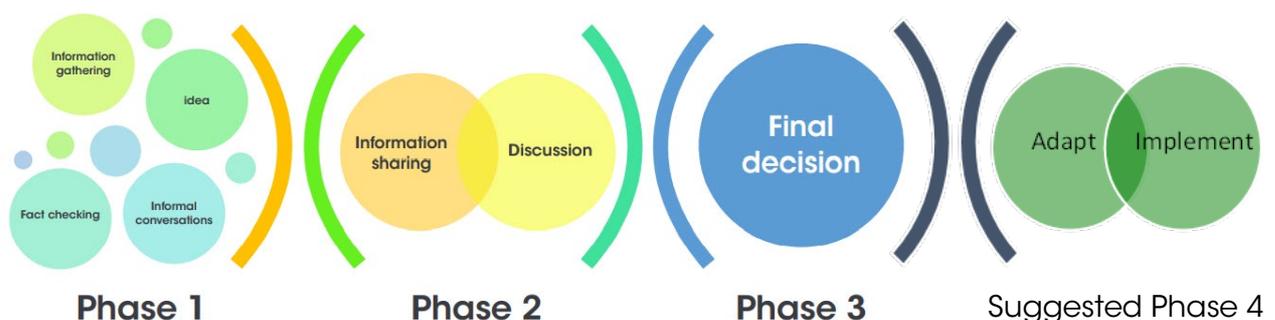


Figure 7: Process of decision-making (adapted)

This example has so-called task groups formed by the partnership, with at least one partnership member involved. The groups involve smaller teams of individuals helping to decide how projects are being managed and delivered. In theory, community members and volunteers can be involved in this more practical stage of decision-making.

However, in practice, the people who go to the task groups tend to be paid workers and partnership members, rather than wider community residents and volunteers beyond the partnership. It seems that even with sub-groups and task groups, partnerships find it difficult to attract community members and volunteers to get involved in decision-making meetings.

## **Grants as a way of involving community members and volunteers**

Many Big Local areas encourage individuals or small groups of local community residents to apply for funding for small projects to benefit local communities. We found examples of this being delivered through a community chest. This is an opportunity to input an idea into the decision-making process; ideas are largely shaped and led by the grantee, with appropriate support from the partnership. Due to the small nature of these grants, we found many examples where the community member who submitted (and effectively owned) the idea also became a volunteer involved in decision-making about the activity, and its delivery.

Projects – including a small local art project and a girls’ football team – have been funded by the Big Local partnership but developed and delivered by residents. The partnership and resident volunteers are working together towards shared objectives and increasing community leadership.

## **Partnership members connecting to the local community through their other volunteering roles**

Partnership members are at the heart of the Big Local programme, and often volunteer huge amounts of their time to work for the benefit of their communities. Partnership members appear to be more educated and older than the general population, more likely to be white and female (partnership review 2021 and membership survey 2018).<sup>12</sup> While it might be desirable to have a wider range of residents on the partnership, we found some significant advantages to partnership members belonging to the so-called civic core of volunteers. These other volunteering roles are an important way of linking partnership members to local residents who do not attend partnership meetings. For many partnership members, these interactions were important for understanding community needs and informally involving community members in decisions, at least at the information-gathering stage.

Every community resident partnership member we spoke to had more than one voluntary role. Many also had other community leadership roles, such as being a local authority counsellor, school governor or board member. Not all partnership-

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<sup>12</sup> Unpublished data from Local Trust

member volunteering was the formal decision-making type we might associate with the so-called civic core, but their other volunteering roles provide a valuable way to connect with community members and better understand the community and local priorities. One rep pointed out:

“Big Local partnership members are also volunteers in other local groups and activities – Britain in Bloom, craft groups, toddler groups, gala groups, resident groups, holiday clubs, food access, church groups and many others.”

Other partnership members were also volunteers on the ground, getting practically involved in activities such as crafts, environmental work, or food distribution. All these activities give partnership members the chance to work alongside other community members and community members the chance to influence the partnership. One partnership member told us:

“The environment and crafts are my interests. There was funding for small groups, I went along on a Saturday, met a person and we started a craft group together”.

For this partnership member, the craft group grew and ultimately has become a multi-cultural space which taught the partnership member a lot about community cohesion and offered opportunities to sit and chat with different women from the local area. This led to the partnership member becoming a link between Big Local and more diverse members of the community, through their shared interests in craft. In this way, it could be argued that the community members are indirectly influencing the decision-making of the partnership, and some are explicitly aware of this. One volunteer told us:

“Volunteering makes me feel good, I like the people, I can see where we can go with it. I’m good at being the person in the middle of all the cogs, I know who to talk to.”

While partnership members may have been involved in community leadership before Big Local, there is evidence of a shift towards a more community-led approach and better links between local organisations. Community centres can be a focus – volunteers and partnership members often attend centres regularly and feel a strong sense of ownership. They provide a space and opportunities for people to express their views, for relationships to grow, and confidence to be built, leading to the expression of honest and fulsome volunteers’ views about community needs and priorities, with potential to influence partnerships’ priorities. A partnership member told us:

“I was doing things individually before Big Local volunteering. Now I’m working with groups and teams – more partnership working... Having discussions and making joint choices. We try not to overlap what we do with other organisations or groups in the area. That requires a lot of awareness of what goes on around you. Resident-led community involvement. Not just the partnership making the decisions for themselves but looking out for everyone in the area.”

In our case study areas, as already mentioned, Big Local partnership members may also be community leaders in religious groups or local churches or mosques. In one partnership with a large Muslim community, and where some partnership members are associated with the mosque, many volunteers are recruited by word of mouth,

through contacts and connections with partnership members, and motivated by religious principles and a desire to help and support others.

As well as other community leadership roles being a source of connection to the community, in some instances the Big Local partnership work impacted positively on those other organisations. We found evidence in some cases that the ethos of Big Local, and the training and support available, had an influence on how the partnership member understood community work and volunteering. In some cases this led to them taking a more resident-led, participatory and community-focused approach to their other community leadership roles where volunteers were involved.

Partnership members' existing connections, relationships and community links have been embedded into their networks and communications. In the following example we can see how the partnership member is moving towards collective social action based upon this new network and awareness.

### **A strategic approach to shared decision-making 'keeping it local'**

In terms of its decision-making, Area X has consistently adopted a strategic approach to ensuring that power is shared and kept local. From the outset they were clear that the partnership always wanted to deliver what they know is right for their own area and to keep the Big Local money local wherever possible, minimising any so-called 'creaming off' of salaries and management costs elsewhere.

During the Getting Started phase of Big Local, Area X noted that people who had always been involved continued to be critical to success, but that the challenge was to roll things out to the wider community and to "bring all the cross-cutting areas together" (plan review). Area X wanted to provide continued capacity support for volunteers and enable local people to take up roles on decision-making panels. They also wanted to provide more training and support to build up the capacity of volunteers to take up roles on other local groups and panels, and to work with local partners to develop a plan about how to engage with those who need services and how those services should be delivered.

More recently, Area X has joined with nine other local organisations to form a consortium. The consortium in turn has defined the parameters of its area, beyond just the Big Local area, and is a formal collaboration of both local and city-wide organisations, enabling the sharing of resources, alignment of delivery and a shared approach to working with volunteers. Between them, the organisations support a wide range of volunteers and volunteering opportunities. The other organisations say that "Big Local acted as the catalyst" and that "without Big Local this would never have happened".

Working together and sharing power, strengths and resources, the consortium is able to bid for bigger, more ambitious projects. Big Local's paid workers and the LTO provide back-office support for writing proposals and monitoring contracts, allowing the volunteer organisations to get on with delivering what they do best at a local level. The consortium has been recognised by the city council and is

the delivery lead for a programme for young people across the consortium's area, keeping the money and services local.

Community members and volunteers become involved with Big Local decision-making through a range of routes. For some it's a gradual process of increased involvement and willingness to take on responsibility; for others, it is through bringing forward ideas and seeking resources; and for some it comes through volunteering with organisations that receive funding and support from Big Local.

As previously explained, there are at least three stages in decisions about resources, plus a potential fourth (once the decision has been made) about how the allocated funding is used in practice. We found volunteers more involved in the first two information-gathering and discussion phases, and in the fourth practical phase, but no reliable evidence of volunteers who are not partnership members being at the table when the actual decisions are being made. We did find evidence however, of volunteers who started in very modest ways and are now at that table as full partnership members.

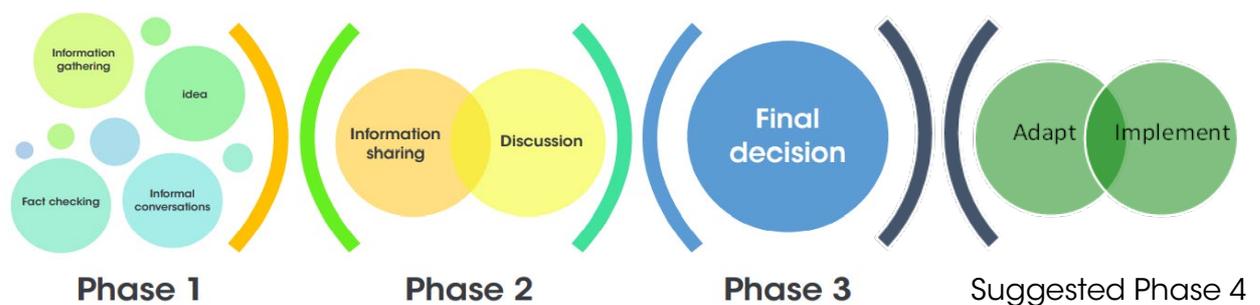


Figure 8 (Figure 7 repeated): Process of decision-making (adapted)

Volunteers have and use lots of opportunities to inform and influence partnership members' decision-making by sharing their views and what they know. This includes contact in community centres, through explicit consultation exercises and informal conversations, and where partnership members themselves volunteer alongside other community members. Activities in community centres also mean that the results of decisions are often visible; volunteers can see what they have helped to shape or make happen, helping to build a sense of agency.

Through grant-making, where community volunteers bring forward ideas for projects or activities funding, volunteers are able to influence resource allocation directly. Suggestions that come from needs or enthusiasms within the community tend to be privileged over those imposed from outside. Sub-groups, or themed groups, based around particular interests or activities, have autonomous decision-making power in some Big Local areas over allocated pots of funding. However, when it comes to actual decisions being made within these groups, there were still difficulties surrounding involving wider community volunteers.

In one area, decision-making has been shared with other organisations working locally, and Big Local resources underpin this consortium's activities. This in turn

draws in a wider range of volunteers beyond the Big Local partnership, and facilitates the sharing of information, policies, and procedures.

### **Key points: Volunteering as a route to decision making**

- Three phases are identified in the decision-making over Big Local resources. We found volunteers involved in the information-gathering and discussion phases – that is, consulted rather than participating.
- We also saw volunteer input into a fourth practical phase (deciding how allocated funds are used to deliver services or activities).
- We did not find reliable evidence of volunteers who were not partnership members being at the table when the actual decisions were being made.
- We did find volunteers who started in very modest ways and were encouraged to take on more responsibility going on to make decisions as full partnership members.
- Volunteers are able to influence decision-making by working alongside partnership members who also volunteer and by applying to Big Local for grants to realise their ideas and provide local services and activities.

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# Conclusion

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Across the country, in nearly all Big Local areas, residents are getting involved in their local community as volunteers, as a result of Big Local partnership activity and spending.

We found evidence of thousands of volunteer roles across the country linked to Big Local but outside of the partnerships themselves. The drivers of volunteering are linked to:

1. volunteers' interests and motivations
2. the availability of community infrastructure to support volunteering, including the presence of community centres and workers, and advice and support surrounding policy and the governance of volunteers.

Big Local areas, prior to being selected for Big Local, were often characterised by their low levels of community infrastructure and, by association, low levels of community engagement and volunteering. We have found evidence from throughout the Big Local programme that partnerships, through their activities and funding, have carried out activities that stimulate and encourage volunteering capitalising on both drivers.

Due to their resident-led ethos, through community consultation, grant making, and paid worker support, Big Local partnerships have facilitated new and increased volunteering opportunities in direct response to the interests, needs and motivations of residents. These were sometimes deliberate attempts to stimulate volunteering, but more often as ways of responding to a community need or request, which provided opportunities for residents to volunteer.

There was strong evidence of Big Local funding and support helping to develop the infrastructure to support and enable volunteers. At times, community engagement through volunteering was the primary aim, as with brokerage or with the consortium, which is specifically creating the infrastructure to support wider volunteering and meet local needs.

Elsewhere, partnerships have supported community assets of value to the community, and facilitated associated volunteering, by funding community centres or workers to run community activities. The presence of Big Local partnerships themselves (often funding paid workers with volunteer coordination roles, with keen volunteers motivated to stimulate community engagement) in turn encourages further volunteering.

We have not been able to gather sufficient evidence to definitively show how the number of volunteers in Big Local areas has changed over time. Facilitating volunteering has not been universal or even across Big Local areas, and has been

dependent on the actions, priorities and facilities available to partnerships. Nevertheless, we also found that Big Local areas often underestimate the amount of volunteering their partnership supports or facilitates. This is principally for two reasons: first, many partnership members do not recognise informal volunteering and what people tend to think of as just 'helping out' as volunteering; second, there can be a problem of attribution, wherein partnerships have funded an activity or organisation that in turn is supported by volunteers. Volunteers, and to a lesser extent partnership members, tend to associate volunteering with the nature of the activity, or the organisations or venues that are funded, and so the role of Big Local is not always recognised.

In many ways, volunteering in Big Local mirrors national trends in volunteering, but it is more likely to help to connect local residents to their communities, and/or to have an immediate, visible impact on the immediate, local physical environment. Big Local volunteering is more likely than national volunteering to be focused on environmental groups, gardening or litter-picking, and volunteers and workers told us that these activities make a good start, resonating with the difference residents want to see in their own neighbourhoods.

However, Big Local volunteering is much less likely than national volunteering to relate to fundraising, a national campaign or charitable cause. Being motivated by the potential benefits to their own local community is much more likely for Big Local volunteers. We found strong evidence of this; residents see their volunteering as benefitting their local community, and by default their own lives, and they value this. Although their priority is often the project or activity itself rather than volunteering generally, they like that it brings opportunities to give back and feel connected, through community participation or celebration.

Many Big Local areas put on large-scale community events and celebrations to connect the community. These events usually require volunteers in quantity, and so help to raise participation and involvement. Volunteers supporting these events talk about the enjoyment and satisfaction of being part of these events and of connecting and serving their communities, and of a sense of civic pride.

Big Local areas were established in communities that often lacked social infrastructure. We have found evidence that the legacy of Big Local is likely to result in continued opportunities for volunteers to be involved, resulting in continued community participation and resident-led change after the programme comes to an end. We also know that in 19 areas there is a specific volunteer support role in place, and that these areas plan to retain this when Big Local funding ends.

In terms of leadership, there exist many low-cost volunteering activities. For example, volunteer-led environmental groups or sports activities, which were supported initially by Big Local, but are now self-managing; these are unlikely to stop when Big Local funding ends. In addition, as partnerships reach the legacy-planning stage of their plans, they are considering the value and impact of the community infrastructure they have invested in and helped to build. If desired, they can safeguard these in their legacy planning.

People who engage in volunteering with Big Local report high levels of satisfaction and enjoyment from volunteering, and there is evidence of volunteering being an

important contributing factor to personal development, self-confidence and wellbeing, and generally improved quality of life, both directly and indirectly. People gain personal benefits and appreciate the improvements and greater connectedness in their communities. Big Local residents told us how volunteering makes them feel good and involved in their communities, and how they love feeling of making a difference.

We found huge variation in volunteers, their motivations, capacity, level of commitments and participation varied. For many, informal, time-limited volunteering is accessible and fits well in their busy lives. Others have very high levels of need or caring responsibilities, which may prevent them engaging in paid work, and they look to volunteering as an alternative or stepping-stone. There are also people with a wide range of volunteering roles who say that volunteering and the community is their life. One thing that was clear across the board is that whatever type of volunteer is involved, coordinating, supporting and managing volunteers can be very challenging and time-consuming work.

We found paid workers who support and coordinate volunteering are an incredibly valuable community asset, both in their capacity to support volunteers, and through their connections with other local organisations. Paid workers were considered the only way to support some types of volunteering. However, there are multiple examples of a volunteer leadership model working successfully with the right infrastructure and choice of activity. Whichever the model, effective support of and communication with volunteers is very important, as is recognition of the contribution they are making.

Volunteers are generally involved in decision-making in Big Local through the same sort of mechanisms through which other residents are involved, but are more likely to have the opportunities and confidence to contribute their ideas. This helps to makes these volunteers feel listened to, that they are making a positive contribution, and to feel a sense of pride and ownership.

Many Big Local partnership members had other community leadership roles. We found some evidence that the ethos of Big Local, and the training and support that is available through the programme, can influence how partnership members understand community work and volunteering. In some instances, this has led to them taking a more resident-led, participatory and community-focused approach to their other leadership roles.

In conclusion: the resident-led, local nature of Big Local, and the availability of funding as directed by residents, has enabled thousands of people to participate in their local communities through volunteering. Partnerships have directly and indirectly built capacity and grown community infrastructure to support people to volunteer – to the benefit of both residents and their wider communities.

# Recommendations: How to enable and grow local volunteering

Volunteering through Big Local provides clear benefits for both communities and for volunteers. In our research we observed a huge range of innovative programmes and events involving volunteers. We met committed and passionate volunteers as diverse as the communities with which they were involved. But engaging more volunteers isn't without its challenges. Here we outline how our findings can be used to help other Big Local areas looking to engage volunteers more successfully.

## **Make use of welcoming people and spaces to build confidence for people to get started**

The value of community centres or hubs in encouraging volunteering cannot be underplayed. Whether these are operated by Big Local or borrowed, shared or rented, they provide an important focus. People see community centres as a local space – often **their** space – offering opportunities to connect with their community. People new to an area, as well as practised volunteers, come to centres to take part, to get involved and make connections. And community centres generate a large range of hyper-local volunteering opportunities.

Activities and events in community centres provide opportunities for residents to visit a centre regularly, or on an ad hoc basis, without commitment, and to develop relationships with workers and volunteers. This is often a route to volunteering. Community hubs and cafés provide relatable chances for community volunteering, and were seen as valuable centres for supporting people, particularly during the pandemic – both for those in need and for the volunteers themselves.

Workers (and established volunteers) in community centres often act as catalysts for people making the shift from visitor to volunteer. They provide a consistent presence and source of support, getting to know people, identifying needs and strengths, and encouraging new volunteering or community activities. This can build towards directly involving wider community members in Big Local delivery and decision-making.

## **Environmental projects and litter-picking encourage volunteering and improve the local area**

Environmental volunteering, gardening and litter-picks are highly successful and efficient ways of engaging a wide range of volunteers.

- People don't have to be convinced of the need. Litter and the environment are often a priority and immediate concern for people, affecting perceptions of an area and its safety – for instance, of play spaces.

- Activities often don't require a regular commitment, are relatively accessible and potentially less intimidating than other types of volunteering. They are also easier to walk away from than activities in an indoor space if people feel anxious.
- The benefits to the environment are visible. They are very local and make a direct difference that residents are able to see and appreciate.
- They are rewarding. People gain satisfaction from observing the improvement and take some pride in what they have achieved.
- There are tangible benefits for the volunteers in health and wellbeing, in being outdoors and exercising.
- They are low risk, and don't need much paperwork or organisation.

## **Community events and celebrations attract a lot of volunteers and bring the community together**

One-off events are the types of volunteering in Big Local that attract the highest numbers of volunteers. This is partly because many people can volunteer at once, and many roles do not demand high levels of commitment. This attracts a wide range of volunteers who may not be able or willing to commit to more regular volunteering activities.

These activities are highly varied, and customisable to the characteristics and needs of the local community. We saw examples of carnival, fairs, religious and cultural celebration events, movie nights and more. As many of these events are celebrations, they can be positive, joyful ways to bring the community together, and actively involve residents. While these events require intensive planning and support, we saw examples of them being run very effectively by volunteers.

## **Volunteering is very varied, and matching the right volunteer to the right activity matters**

For many volunteers, the theme or subject of volunteering was the primary attraction, with the notion of helping the community being a secondary benefit. An avid recruiter of volunteers who is also a partnership member described it like this:

"People don't put their hand up to be a general volunteer, you have to spark something in them".

Big Local sports, arts and crafts, and children's activities are hugely popular, and attract volunteers wanting to share their interests and skills. Gendered groups, sports, and targeted activities are useful ways to engage varied profiles of volunteers. Support, befriending and wellbeing volunteering was the most intensive type of volunteering activity to support, but acted as a route for people who were less likely to volunteer but happy to help out.

Finding the right type of activity to interest a volunteer is important – but the volunteer roles also need to match the volunteer’s needs, capabilities and availability. Some Big Local areas recruit for specific volunteering roles, and others create environments (such as volunteer fairs) where volunteers can meet with organisations who have volunteer roles available.

At least one Big Local area took a more proactive approach, employing a volunteer broker to carry out matching, through supporting both volunteers and organisations. This was highly successful in creating more volunteer opportunities and community infrastructure.

## **Volunteers need encouragement and support**

We found that often there is not one specific moment when a person becomes a volunteer; it is often a journey, with small, sometimes reversible steps of taking on additional responsibility. Volunteering that is informal and flexible is valued, particularly at the start of people’s volunteering journey. Good support helps volunteers navigate this journey effectively, towards benefit and progression that is in-line with the aims and needs of the volunteer.

However, supporting volunteers in this way can be extremely resource-intensive. Volunteers often have high support needs; it usually requires a paid worker or volunteer leader to provide this. In the most successful circumstances, this person is highly skilled at communicating with people, understanding their needs, and providing appropriate support and encouragement to overcome barriers. Volunteers, meanwhile, really value being acknowledged and feeling appreciated.

## **Minimise the formality where possible, and get help with the legalities, policies and procedures**

Most partnerships work with partner organisations to recruit and support volunteers directly, or through the activities they fund. Policies, procedures, DBSs and risk assessments are all important tools in keeping volunteers safe and avoiding conflict. However, those supporting volunteers and the volunteers themselves can find these legal and administrative elements off-putting, to the extent that they can act as a barrier to participation. Many partnerships have resolved this by seeking support from other organisations (including overarching bodies, online resources, and volunteering centres).

In the most effective examples, partnerships and organisations have tailored shared governance documents, resulting in a low administrative burden for themselves and volunteers. In other areas, the partnerships themselves identified a gap in community infrastructure here and filled it. This work provided administrative support to a range of local organisations also supporting volunteers, resulting in a wider range of volunteering opportunities and a more effective network of local organisations for the benefit of the whole community.

# Appendix: Methodology

## Desk-based research, scoping and benchmarking

First, we extensively reviewed and analysed existing Local Trust research and information, alongside NCVO and government data. This allowed us to build on what was already known and identify gaps in existing data to inform the development of our evaluation framework and research tools. This included the scoping of available evidence on volunteers outside partnerships.

Ultimately, this informed the study team's understanding of resource allocation, volunteering themes, and opportunities and choice of Big Local partnership areas.

Sources analysed included:

- Big Local monitoring data
- National Taking Part Volunteering Survey
- NCVO Time Well Spent: A National Survey on the Volunteering Experience survey
- NCVO *Volunteering during the pandemic*
- Open data accessed from Local Insight
- Local Trust research

## Sampling partnerships

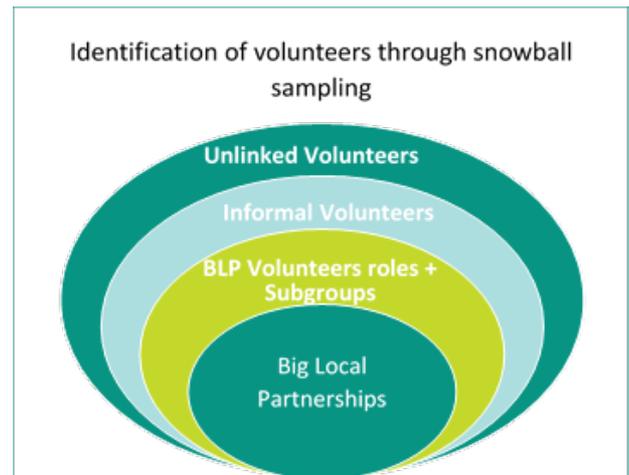
We set out to research volunteering in the following six Big Local areas: Marsh and Micklefield; Gannow; Kirk Hallam; St James; Scotlands and Bushbury Hill; and Greenmoor. When selecting the six areas, we considered the characteristics of the areas, and whether each region is representative of Big Local Areas or represents an outlier. We considered typology, ethnic diversity, community needs score<sup>13</sup> as an indicator of civic activity, relative deprivation and income, and population size.

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<sup>13</sup> The Community Needs Index was developed to identify areas experiencing poor community and civic infrastructure, relative isolation and low levels of participation in community life. The index was created by combining a series of 19 indicators, conceptualised under three domains: Civic Assets, Connectedness and Active and Engaged Community. A higher score indicates that an area has higher levels of community need.

In order to identify volunteers, the study team utilised what is known as snowball sampling, which involved engaging local partnerships and asking who they suggest we talk to, examining local plans and plan reviews, and using contacts to identify people who were volunteering informally (that is, not associated with partnerships). A visual representation of this sampling approach is shown overleaf.

At times, we had difficulty engaging partnership members and volunteers. Often people were too busy, affected by COVID-19 or, unmotivated to participate in our research. Partnership members and participants sometimes did not recognise informal volunteers as volunteers, and so did not see the research as relevant.



## Interviews and participatory methods

### COVID-19

We understand and acknowledge the importance of gaining participants' trust and creating an environment and mechanisms wherein people can communicate openly. The study team acknowledged that the best way to do this was to meet in person in order to facilitate snowballing through sharing of trusted contacts, but also by attending and building connections with volunteers within communities. We aimed to travel to each Big Local area to meet with volunteers, but the COVID-19 pandemic prevented this from happening, resulting in only two in-person site visits. However, we considered these to be robust, as they encompassed demographic diversity, geography, socioeconomic factors, and age/ethnicity differences. In light of COVID-19-related lockdowns and restrictive measures, most research activity and participatory methods took place online or via phone.

### In-depth qualitative interviews

The qualitative interviews conducted were semi-structured and flexible in their nature and could be conducted based on participants' preferences. The site visits allowed for face-to-face visits, whereas other interviews were conducted via phone or online video call. These adaptable interview questions were a good way to probe for in-depth insights and reflections on people's volunteering experiences. In total, we conducted 53 interviews, and organised one focus group with six people, 30 of whom were volunteers, including partnership members and non-partnership members.

Alongside interviews with partnership members and volunteers from the six areas selected, we interviewed the lead on volunteer support from Gaunless Gateway Big Local, and two members of the Local Trust team who are working on the support offer to Big Local areas but were previously the paid workers for Rudheath and

Witton Together Big Local and W12 Together Big Local. These interviews provided additional context and supplementary information on how volunteering outside partnerships works in other areas.

### **Representatives' survey**

In addition to interviews, we added some questions to Local Trust's survey of Big Local reps from 150 Big Local areas. The aim of the survey was to gain understanding of the broader picture of volunteering across Big Local areas. The questions focused in particular on the number of volunteers involved outside of the partnership; the activities those volunteers are involved in; successful strategies for attracting volunteers, especially more diverse types of volunteers; who supports and manages volunteers and in what ways; and any challenges faced in relation to volunteers beyond the partnerships. Representatives were asked to estimate volunteer involvement based on their knowledge of their partnerships.

### **Workshop**

We hosted an hour long "Keeping Connected" session on March 15 2022. Participation in research is time consuming; it needs to actively benefit the partnerships involved. This session was an opportunity open to all partnerships, to come together and discuss people's volunteering journeys, how partnerships can attract and support volunteers, and how Big Local has encouraged volunteers to link to other community members and grown community leadership. The session allowed attendees to discuss any challenges and opportunities relating to volunteering outside the partnership and share learning about volunteer involvement in their communities.

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• ERS: Working collaboratively to evaluate & measure impact with integrity, honesty and professionalism

[ers.org.uk](https://ers.org.uk)

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of communities.

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding, and to draw on the learning from our work delivering the Big Local programme to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

[localtrust.org.uk](https://localtrust.org.uk)



# Local Trust

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