Research & Evaluation Action Plan: summary

Big Local is new, different and exciting; it builds on previous community-based regeneration programmes and puts power and control in the hands of those who live in the areas. We believe that Big Local has the potential to support residents to increase their skills and confidence, and ultimately, making a lasting difference in the communities where they live. Our ambition is not simply to deliver a programme and learn from how it's going, but to shape and influence policy and practice through shared learning from the Big Local programme.

Testing a hypothesis for the Big Local programme

Local Trust manages and evaluates Big Local in a responsive and adaptive way. That's why we've decided to move away from a theory of change. Instead, we have spent the past few months developing an action plan which is more flexible and embraces the non-prescriptive nature of the programme. The action plan outlines the projects we will be working on over the next couple of years and was developed with input from the Local Trust team and further refined through the input of people in Big Local areas, trustees, reps and support providers.

The upcoming research projects have been developed specifically to provide evidence and support for the value and uniqueness of Big Local. The programme is an experiment, which tests that:

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

This is our hypothesis, which we have refined to capture the most important aspects of Big Local. Due to the nature of the Big Local programme, especially working with 150 communities and for a such a long period of time, defining one research project that will test every aspect of our hypothesis would be nearly impossible. Instead, we have identified three lines of enquiry which are inter-related but focus on testing different parts of the hypothesis. These projects which will begin to answer the lines of enquiry will then allow us to make more substantiated claims against our hypothesis.

The lines of enquiry that the research team will be exploring are:

1. **Place-based funding**: how to best deliver it and the extent to which it is a suitable way of building community capacity.
2. **Resident-led decision-making:** what it looks like and whether it leads to a transfer of power to communities.
3. **Positive and lasting change:** measuring the change Big Local is having in the communities but ensuring it is appropriate and proportionate to the programme. Also being mindful to minimise the burden on communities.

Exploring the lines of enquiry

Place-based funding

This is a key theme, and, ultimately, much of our research output builds towards informing this line of enquiry. It explores different aspects of learning around delivering place-based funding and the ways in which it works best. There are several projects dealing overtly with the theme, including learning more about who is living in the communities and how to best engage them and investigating the different models of place-based funding that other funders are using.

Transient and new populations

Big Local is a long-term programme and many areas will see their communities change over the 10-15 year period as a result of migration, transience and new housing developments. We will be taking an action research approach to explore how areas can better engage with new populations within their communities. This research will introduce areas to new ways of working and engaging with communities that may be faster, and more effective, than more traditional community development methods.

Pushing the boundaries of Big Local

We are examining the sorts of boundaries that appear to be evident in Big Local areas. As well as looking at the issues arising from boundaries in Big Local areas that do not always reflect existing community boundaries, both physical and between different groups, we will also explore whether the introduction of Big Local affected identity and participation, how these boundaries appear to be challenging the work of Big Local in bringing communities together, and how Big Local partnerships have attempted to overcome boundary issues.

How we live in places

The success of place-based initiatives depends on knowing the way of life and interactions of residents as much as their motivations and aspirations. The feeling is, people stay home more, screen time is growing, and people spend less time moving about their neighbourhoods and encountering each other. This research project will test these assumptions and provide better ways to engage people in communities that may not be interacting with each other as much.

Sustaining community hubs

A community hub is a multi-purpose, open and accessible building for the local community, providing services that the local community need. According the Area Assessment Tool, 85 of 150 Big Local areas use a building or hub for their activities. However, owning or managing a community hub comes with challenges. Research shows that pressures on local authorities mean that community hubs have struggled to engage with and draw on the expertise of local authorities. Furthermore, there is a lack of business skills among some of the volunteers who set up and run community hubs. We will be looking to provide advice and guidance for organisations looking to set up community hubs, underpinned by rigorous research.

Place based funding

Central to this line of enquiry is understanding how the Big Local model of place-based funding differs from other models. Place based funding has a number of meanings and is interpreted differently by different funders. Big Local is a place based fund, however, the focus on developing community skills and capacity is unique to most other programmes. The resident-led nature of the programme has implications for the amount of resources and support required, the length of time

and the appropriate size of the area. A literature review on other place-based funding models will be conducted and supplement existing research on Big Local.

Resident-led decision-making and action

A central question as part of Big Local is what makes effective resident-led decision-making. And not just effective but *meaningful*. Previous UK regeneration and empowerment programmes often paid lip service to decision-making processes, but the actual power that stakeholders had was relatively limited. Several projects are unpacking power and decision-making spaces in Big Local.

Devolved decision-making and power

This research will explore an important aspect of our hypothesis - whether Big Local, with its awarding of funds and support structure, leads to a transfer of power from Local Trust, and by proxy the National Lottery, to local residents.

Community commissioning

We are working with NLGN to explore the case for a more radical approach to commissioning that offers service users and the wider community control over the commissioning process. Emerging evidence from Big Local demonstrates the merits of handing over a budget directly to a community and enabling them to commission what service or support they decide is best for their area. In the context of reducing resources, many discretionary services are being pared back, and so there is an opportunity to understand more fully how existing resource can be spent on the things that matter for people – and give them a greater role in determining what this is. This project will investigate the principles that could underpin a more radical approach as well as the trade-offs involved in adopting a different model.

Scaling up Big Local: the opportunities and challenges

Big Local has the potential to demonstrate what makes for effective resident-led decision making, however, a distinct feature of the Big Local programme is that it takes place in hyperlocal areas. This may help resident-led decision making in some ways, and present challenges in others: for example, engaging with and influencing a large unitary local authority has been identified as a barrier for Big Locals. We will consider the importance of size to decision-making in Big Local to start answering the question 'is it possible to do effective resident led decision making on a bigger scale?'.

Positive and lasting change

Finally, understanding what change is in the context of a long-term place-based programme needs to be considered. In a programme as diverse as Big Local, finding a way of capturing change can be challenging. Several areas of work are addressing this.

Supporting areas to better measure the change they are making

While it is important that we develop our own information across the programme, we are also interested in developing residents' skills and confidence in measuring the change they are making in their areas. This is a major piece of work that will involve multiple facets of support including:

- Collecting responses from local residents on how they view the change Big Local is making in their areas.
- Providing tools and resources to Big Local areas (including Getting Started and Local Insight)

- Offering training events on different aspects of measuring change to increase residents' skills and confidence.
- Providing bespoke support to Big Local areas to help them measure the change a particular project or activity is having.

Creating a better legacy

Building on previous research on how Big Local areas close to spending all of their £1 million were planning for legacy, this piece of research will investigate a different sample of areas to explore how they are planning for the legacy of Big Local. Research will explore issues including creating legacy organisations, sustaining activities and capturing how people feel about the area after the Big Local money is spent.

Who we will be working with

To complete this ambitious plan, we will be working with different organisations and using new and innovative methods. There will also be a continued emphasis on working directly with people in Big Local areas – whether it be to interview them for their first-hand experience or developing their skills and capacity to measure the change Big Local is having in their area.

Using data to better inform our research

The research team at Local Trust will also be collecting and using different types of data to dig deeper into our understanding of Big Local areas. We are in the process of analysing and reporting on our biennial partnership member survey in which we received over 1000 responses. This survey is an incredibly rich source of data on the people driving Big Local on the ground. The comprehensive survey asks partnership members about their personal views on their partnership, progress, their ability to influence and create change, their connectedness to the Big Local programme and the support offered by Local Trust.

The Area Assessment Tool (AAT) is a source of programme wide data that helps us to assess progress, change and risk across all Big Local areas in a systematic way. As part of the analysis of AAT and other data, typologies of Big Local areas will be identified and then explored in further detail. We will also be drawing on open data available on Local Insight, which is specific to each Big Local area.

We also have a subscription to Local Insight, which allows us to access open data specific to all 150 Big Local areas. This is incredibly rich information which we will use to supplement AAT data and in our other research projects as required.

Sharing what we have learned

Finally, to share what we have learned over the course of this year and hear from others who are doing community research, we will be organising and hosting a national conference in November and will be held in London. The conference will be delivered in collaboration with ARVAC.

If you have any queries or want to find out more, please contact research@localtrust.org.uk