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The role of Big Local partnerships during lockdown

This report investigates themes, patterns and learning from data collected on the responses of Big Local communities to COVID-19.

Introduction

The past few months have demonstrated that people come together during times of crisis to help each other. Local Trust began a process of rapid data collection in April 2020 to capture the responses taken by different communities to COVID-19, as a way to look across the myriad approaches different Big Local areas were taking and to share them with other areas for inspiration.[1] By September, over 600 examples from 120 of the 150 Big Local areas were collected.

A learning team of eight Local Trust colleagues was formed to identify themes, patterns and learning from the data collection. This paper reflects the team's discussions on how Big Local areas responded to COVID-19 and the roles that the Big Local partnership took on during the pandemic to ensure that our communities were supported.[2]

The team identified three general roles within this work across the board:

- **The doers:** Actively identifying what is needed and then doing something about it, rather than waiting for somebody to respond.

- **The connectors:** Building on previous work of Big Local partnerships to make people feel connected to their community and each other.

- **The collaborators:** Working with others to ensure a coordinated response to the pandemic

These roles are not mutually exclusive, nor do they provide an exhaustive account of all the work taking place in Big Local areas. However, they do provide a useful framework for discussing how community-led responses to the pandemic took shape.

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[1] Various Big Local approaches were also captured in blogs and more in-depth research commissioned by Local Trust.

[2] Big Local partnerships are a group of at least eight people, the majority of whom must be residents, who guide the overall direction of Big Local in the Big Local area.

The doers

Being a doer means actively identifying what is needed and then doing something about it, rather than waiting for others to step in.

The pandemic has demonstrated how adaptable Big Local areas can be. Our internal research found that in April, 52 per cent of partnerships were described by Big Local reps as "engaged" and 28 per cent as "energetic" (Local Trust 2020a). This continued energy and enthusiasm meant that areas were able to understand need in the area and respond quickly to it, often before others.

What enables Big Local partnerships to be doers?

Partnerships were able to adapt what they already had in place to provide activities, projects and services suited to the 'new normal', often before anybody else. Their existing projects and activities, as well as their physical infrastructures, helped Big Local areas to respond during the pandemic (McCabe et al 2020b).

What does a doer look like?

Finding out what communities needed

Big Local partnerships were often able to find out and address what people needed before local authorities could mobilise. Partnerships made the most of their networks and relationships, and often took to their streets and neighbourhoods, knocking on doors to find out what was required and where they could add value. And to ensure everybody was reached, some went digital – PEACH Big Local in Newham, London, for example, set up online listening campaigns to engage people in their area.

Immediately responding to meet basic needs

Making sure people had access to food has been a [priority for Big Locals partnerships](#), and many areas have dedicating significant time and resources to this. By July, 55 per cent of Big Local areas had delivered food or essential items to their communities (ibid).

> **Some Big Local areas funded, supported or set up food banks, often by making use of their existing community hubs. Some worked collaboratively to coordinate deliveries from these food banks.**

Devonshire West transformed their lunch club into a daily soup and roll delivery service, and Brookside set up a Community Fridge out of their café. Some Big Local areas funded, supported or set up food banks, often by making use of their existing community hubs. Some worked collaboratively to coordinate deliveries from these food banks. However, while partnerships saw these solutions as short-term emergency responses at the beginning of lockdown, some areas have reported that demand has increased, and that they now need to plan how to meet it in the long run.

Many Big Locals also changed their ways of working, projects and activities to meet new local needs. By July, 56 per cent of Big Local areas had moved activities, projects and services online (Local Trust 2020b), such as coffee mornings, craft sessions and youth clubs. However, recognising that digital connectivity was often an issue, they also worked hard to get their communities online. In fact, 47 per cent of Big Local areas supported

people to get online in some way. Riverside Community provided free data to residents without internet connection and offering tablets and training (ibid). Local Trust also invested in premium Zoom licences for each area and by early August, 126 Big Local areas had an account, with many using them for their partnership meetings and other activities. Some Big Local areas made the most of this by creating weekly Zoom drop-in sessions for their residents, offering peer support and an opportunity to learn about what other areas were doing.

Supporting others to be doers

Big Local partnerships have also spent this year supporting others to respond. Some funded groups and organisations so they could continue delivering services during lockdown, and set up grants programmes for community groups, organisations, charities and businesses to deliver local projects and support to residents. They also helped partners adapt their own activities and services to become online or remote, and to build their capacity to deliver in these new ways by sharing their Zoom licences or investing in licenses specifically for them.

What prevents Big Local partnerships from being doers?

- **Community capacity:** Many partnership members, volunteers and Big Local workers are shielding, self-isolating or caring.[3] Some have lost jobs and income or are not able to get online. These have all had a big impact on their capacity to play an active role in the community response.

- **Individual workload:** The personal, mental and physical toll of the last five months brings a serious risk of burnout. It is important to understand the impact the pandemic has had on Big Local partnerships and Big Local workers, particularly those that have taken on the role of a doer. This is something that Local Trust will continue to explore as post-lockdown support is developed for Big Local areas.

The connectors

Being a connector means building on previous work of Big Local partnerships to make people feel connected to their community and each other during a pandemic.

Big Local areas have acted as connectors since the beginning of the programme by engaging their communities and building social capital. The past few months have demonstrated how areas have adapted this from face-to-face work to remote and online working. It has also demonstrated that areas want to build relationships with and between residents, and also within partnerships.

What enables Big Local partnerships to be connectors?

Big Local partnerships drew on their experience of community engagement to take on their role as connectors during lockdown. Research conducted prior to the pandemic on engagement in Big Local areas found that they were motivated to engage with residents

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[3] Big Local is volunteer- and resident-led, but partnerships can choose to fund a local worker to help deliver their Big Local plans. Most of the 150 Big Local areas use some of their Big Local funding for part- or full-time workers, who may be formally employed by the Locally Trusted Organisation (LTO). An LTO is an organisation chosen by the Big Local partnership to administer and account for the distribution of Big Local funding and/or deliver activities or services on behalf of the Big Local partnership.

to help inform and make decisions on how best to spend Big Local funding, ensure nobody was left out and to build more connected communities (Curtis, A. et al., 2016). Particularly the latter point is demonstrated in the way that Big Local partnerships connected people to their community.

What does a connector look like?

Making people feel connected to their community

Big Local areas were able to adapt to delivering activities online in part through access to premium Zoom accounts provided by Local Trust. But they also recognised that their role as connectors could not just be done online; they had to find new ways of connecting beyond just digital, or they risked excluding those most in need of support.

Therefore, Big Local partnerships also offered non-digital activities and services. These were not just to engage residents who may not be able to join in digitally, but to maintain the presence of community events and celebrations that were integral to their community engagement prior to lockdown. Cars Area Together, for example, involved 50 families in lockdown gardening, with workers delivering plants and all the necessary gear for individuals to get stuck in. The response from the community has been overwhelming and has given Cars a way to engage with new people in their Big Local area.

> **Many Big Local areas had to find new ways of connecting beyond just digital, or they risked excluding those most in need of support.**

Big Local partnerships also organised at home street parties for VE day. These included making creativity packs for residents, delivering Easter eggs, bringing in brass bands to play in the streets and other fun things to help people feel connected to their community in a difficult time.

Getting personal

During lockdown, Big Local areas also prioritised more personal connections and their relationships with residents and partnership members. Connectors set up calls with residents who were on their own during lockdown and at risk of isolation. One area had a list of around 40 older people who were self-isolating alone whom they would call weekly for a (sometimes lengthy) chat. Many have taken up this type of befriending support, focussing on building relationships, making time for people and getting personal with residents – with the aim of reducing loneliness and strengthening bonds during a period when many people were physically isolated from others.

What prevents Big Local partnerships from being connectors?

- **Time:** Initially, some partnerships struggled to adapt to new ways of working with little time to plan for remote working.

- **Existing issues:** Tension or conflict that existed before COVID-19 was usually worsened during lockdown (Local Trust, 2020c). Some Big Local areas have also expressed a fear that they still are leaving out the most vulnerable people because they are relying heavily on online activities.

The collaborators

Being a collaborator means working with others beyond the Big Local partnership to ensure a coordinated response to the pandemic.

Big Local partnerships work with others to understand what their communities need and to deliver activities and projects that best meet those needs. We know from our biennial partnership members' survey that partnership members feel they have good relationships with local voluntary and community groups (89 per cent), councils (84 per cent) and businesses (57 per cent) (Local Trust, 2020d). During lockdown, partnerships drew on their existing (and new) relationships with partners to help identify needs and respond to the pandemic.

What enables Big Local partnerships to be collaborators?

The relationships, networks and trust that areas have built up over the years through working locally has been invaluable, with 53 per cent of Big Local areas working through their existing relationships with voluntary organisations, and 63 per cent with existing relationships with councils as part of their response (Local Trust, 2020b).

What does a collaborator look like?

By July, over half of Big Local areas collaborated with voluntary organisations and local councils, and 42 per cent collaborated with local Councils for Voluntary Services (CVSs) (ibid). They used their relationships with community groups, schools and businesses during lockdown to coordinate their community response and ensure there weren't any gaps in support to residents. Some areas worked with local schools to identify children in need of food, reaching out specifically to partners working with vulnerable residents to help identify gaps in support that Big Local could fill.

> **Some partnerships felt that, for the first time, councils recognised them for their expertise, capability and knowledge of their community as they responded to COVID-19.**

Working with local councils

72 per cent of Big Local areas have been networking or coordinating with local authorities since the start of the pandemic (ibid). Where these were existing relationships with councils, Big Local areas found that these strengthened during lockdown, enabling better collaborative working. Some partnerships felt that, for the first time, councils recognised them for their expertise, capability and knowledge of their community. Brookside worked with their local parish council to coordinate volunteers, and Sale West was designated the central co-ordinating hub for the wider area. This collaborative work has also included being involved in their councils' wider network of local partners, setting up new projects with the council and using Big Local hubs or other spaces for council support. While many Big Local areas have worked through existing relationships, a small number have established new relationships with their councils during lockdown.

Supporting each other

Being a collaborator isn't just about working together, but also about supporting each other to ensure that services can continue to be delivered. For organisations and groups

that were overwhelmed with demand for their services, Big Local volunteers helped to fill gaps in their capacity. Local furloughed employees also gave their time to Big Local projects (McCabe 2020b).

> **Conscious that not all residents were able to get online, many Big Local partnerships shared information about services and support through their own lockdown leaflets and newsletters.**

Big Local partnerships are also financially supporting local organisations, with 58 per cent of Big Local areas doing so during lockdown and 40 per cent planning to do in the future (ibid). Gaunless Gateway have carried out 'financial health checks' with their partner organisations during lockdown to identify ways that the partnership could support them.

Big Local areas also supported each other by signposting and linking residents to their respective support offers, both through social media and by referring individuals on to specific support provided by others locally. Again, conscious that not all residents were able to get online, many Big Local partnerships shared information about the services and support available through their own lockdown leaflets and newsletters. Not only did this help to ensure that residents were aware of all support and services available to them, it also helped to promote what was already there, potentially reducing duplication when resources and time were thin on the ground.

What prevents Big Local partnerships from being collaborators?

- **Time constraints:** Working with others – whether it be maintaining, strengthening or building new relationships – can be time consuming. This approach is not quick or easy and can involve all the general challenges of partnership working with the additional stress and pressure of a pandemic.

- **Unclear roles:** While some Big Local areas managed to identify what was needed and then worked with others to ensure support was in place, others struggled to do this, citing challenges in knowing their role locally and where they could best add value amongst all the local activity.

- **Disconnect with official channels:** Some experienced the worsening of already strained relationships with councils or have felt excluded from local discussions and decision making.

- **Limited resources:** Working with others has been beneficial for many Big Local areas, but with the financial impact of the pandemic still unfolding, there are some concerns about the capacity of local community groups, organisations and businesses to continue in future. Unlike Big Local areas, most do not have the benefits of secure, long-term funding and support.

Conclusion

The roles Big Local areas took on are interconnected and go beyond providing essential services during a pandemic. In their responses, areas proved they do not work in isolation from what's happening around them, but build and draw on their relationships to ensure a coordinated local response. They also prioritised relationships with external organisations and community groups, and connected people to each other and to the wider community to build community capacity and connections.

At a time when people were at home, often on their own, feeling part of a wider community seems to have been more important than ever. Evidence that volunteer numbers have increased in Big Local areas (McCabe 2020b) – a similar trend seen across the rest of England during lockdown (Paine 2020) – could signify people's increased connection to their community and therefore a desire to get involved in supporting it through crisis and beyond.

What next for Big Local areas? What implications might these roles have for community-led work during and after a crisis?

Many Big Local partnerships intend to change their plans and are likely to undergo a period of community consultation to identify needs post-lockdown. This could create opportunities for partnerships to be even more connected to their communities and to ensure their plans reflect and meet those needs. However, as demand for 'emergency' support (such as food banks) remains, partnerships may decide to continue providing this support in the longer term, which might impact their ability to fund other priorities.

While Big Local areas have tried to support the mental health and wellbeing of residents, there needs to be a focus on partnership members themselves to protect them from burnout, and to manage their capacity to spend their Big Local funding up until the programme ends in 2026. This could also include understanding the impact on those who support them to deliver their plans, such as Big Local workers and Locally Trusted Organisations.

Over half of all Big Local partnerships have moved their activities and projects online, providing new opportunities and increased engagement for some. However, understanding the impact and practicalities of the move from face-to-face to online for Big Local partnerships, their plans (and how they deliver them) and their communities is likely to be an issue in the near future.

Many of the organisations working with Big Local partnerships are themselves feeling the financial strain of COVID-19. It could mean the loss of these organisations locally, but there could new opportunities for working with Big Local as areas continue building relationships and supporting organisations in need.

Local Trust will continue to unpack these implications and understand how they will affect Big Local areas and other 'left behind' areas in the future. Those interested in learning more should look at our year-long research in 26 communities.

Finally, although Big Local areas were mostly selected because of a lack of civic capacity or engagement, the ways in which they have responded to the pandemic – positively, proactively and creatively – is a reminder of the progress they have made since the programme was launched. The roles that areas have taken on throughout lockdown demonstrate the positive impact that can be achieved when resources are placed in the hands of residents, and when they are provided with long-term and nurturing support.

References and further reading

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About Local Trust

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

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding through our work supporting local communities make their areas better places to live, and to draw on the learning from our work to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place

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About Big Local

Big Local is a National Lottery Community funded programme that works with 150 communities across England. The programme began in 2010 and each Big Local area is funded with £1.15 million to spend over 10-15 years. Big Local areas were selected by the National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF) because they didn't receive what was perceived to be their fair share of lottery funding. Low levels of lottery funding were seen to be an indicator that there was a lack of community capacity, in particular few community organisations and groups to bring funding into the area.

The Big Local programme was developed to be non-prescriptive and non-judgemental, giving power directly to residents rather than through organisations to make decisions about how to improve their community. There are very few strings attached to the funding, enabling residents to spend on their own terms and in their own time, on the projects they judge to be most important to them. In addition to funding, Local Trusts also provides flexible and responsive support to help communities build the confidence and capability to make the most of the opportunities available to them.