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Big Local: Reflections from ‘the Outside In’ (Paper Three)

Angus McCabe, Mandy Wilson and Rob Macmillan

Introduction

Our Bigger Story, to date, has primarily captured views and perspectives from those at the heart of the programme – partnership members, active residents, Big Local workers, Locally Trusted Organisations (LTOs) and locally commissioned service providers. Big Local does not, however, exist in a vacuum, either as a national programme or at the local level. It is affected by experience and learning from previous initiatives; it operates in a policy context characterised by the continued effects of austerity and the promotion of localism. It is implemented alongside other organisations and agencies acting within and outside the state to make change at neighbourhood level. Any legacy may rest as much with those outside agencies with whom Big Local works as with the Big Local partnerships themselves.

This paper explores the different perspectives around the extent to which community leadership is being built, and the relationships between Big Local partnerships and those with some resources and influence. It concludes with reflections on the connecting role of Big Local partnerships (and their ability to act as brokers between statutory agencies and communities). Key to this is the question of whether Big Local areas can develop strategic relationships with local government (and others) that go beyond personal relationships and informal networks.

During 2018, the Our Bigger Story evaluation team interviewed 70 people identified as having more ‘external’ connections to Big Local areas involved in Our Bigger Story, such as local authority officers and members, (see appendix for details of interviewees)¹. Perhaps inevitably, given the origins of Big Local (with local authorities involved in the selection of areas) and the workplans of Big Local areas (focusing, often, on environmental issues, play and youth services), the majority of external links are with local government officers and elected members. These are often at the operational, rather than strategic, level, and can depend on the quality of personal relationships rather than being systematically built into structural/policy frameworks.

On the one hand, there are Big Local partnerships that have welcomed the participation of councillors, others have taken a conscious and valid decision to ‘exclude’ elected members (and officers) from partnership meetings (see [Paper 1: Reflections on Resident Led Change](#)). Conversely, the views of external stakeholders vary – from those who actively support Big Local partnerships and their work, through to those who are more sceptical about resident led change models. Therefore, the views expressed here illustrate different perspectives on Big Local, rather than forming a single external view.

This is reflected in feedback where interviewees had different degrees of knowledge about Big Local's aims or ethos - or expressed apparently contradictory, positive and negative, views on the same Big Local.

These varying perceptions give rise to a series of questions for power and resource holders themselves, for Big Local partnerships and Local Trust. All the respondents have roles that can potentially support Big Local partnerships, influence policy and practice in their own and other agencies, and bring potential learning to future place-based and resident led programmes. For this reason, this paper explores the reflections of these strategic stakeholders on Big Local, namely a view 'from the outside in'.

Perceptions around leadership

When residents first came together in 2011 and 2012, they were required to organise – to form some kind of steering group, profile their area and consult with the community. They would then agree a vision, priorities and draw up a plan, form a partnership to take responsibility for overseeing the delivery of that plan, and identify a Locally Trusted Organisation to hold and manage their resources.

Local histories of activism and a pre-existing infrastructure were significant factors shaping this experience. Several people have commented on the value of having experienced activists/volunteers involved at the start to '*hit the ground running*'. Interviewees pointed to the fact that the current activism in Big Local areas is often based on skills learnt, and capacity built, through previous involvement in other neighbourhood/regeneration programmes.

Perspectives from the 'outside' can appear paternalistic and tend to value partnerships which are comprised of 'professional' and articulate people, suggesting (sometimes quite explicitly) that middle class involvement is needed in order to mobilise effectively. There is evidence that some local authority officers and members worked more positively with their Big Local area when there was someone involved, a partnership member or a worker, who had the same background, professional language and working style as them. For example, one councillor commented that knowing the 'rules of the game', the structures and people of influence, made the council and Big Local relationship work:

I think because of [names worker]'s involvement, the level of local government knowledge and expertise – you can talk on that different level, and ... have realistic expectations as to what can be done and how best to do it...that knowledge base if you like is definitely a good thing, and also it allows for the continuity.... I've seen residents' associations change in terms of their makeup...having that continuity with [names worker] has meant that things make sure they do reach completion ...It's quite a challenge I think for people outside of the council to know who to go to for the right project or the right level of expertise.

On a similar note, a voluntary sector worker reported that in another area:

Things have begun to get going here after four years. What's made the difference is the appointment of [names worker] ... worked [here] for a number of years, has a reputation and is well networked with members and officers from previous roles.

Over time, some 'externals' have seen real progress in their Big Local areas. One person commented on how Big Local has shown that residents can lead change, another on how Big Local has nurtured small and fledgling groups and then *'let them go'*. Those who were positive about community involvement praised Big Local for bringing the community together and listening to what the residents wanted. They talked of people grasping the opportunity and identified the peer to peer element as what helps to make it work: *'Taking this risk regarding spend has built confidence – that [they] can make decisions and they will be delivered. It has helped with the later years in the community – residents are now able to take more risky decisions'*

Frustrations

Critical comments often centred around perceived poor governance and the slow pace of decision making and development. This included those who were sympathetic to the Big Local partnership:

'the area [was] chosen because of lack of capacity, to help it build capacity, but people without capacity can't lead the group'.

A councillor and a council officer from two different authorities would dearly love to *'shake up the partnership and organise it'*. Although they knew this was not the right approach: *'...progress would have been quicker if the council had been leading, but then [Big Local] would not embed in the community'*.

Those who were particularly critical of their Big Local area pointed to a perceived lack of community engagement and outreach work. One councillor commented in the Local Trust-New Local Government Network workshop (June 2018) that Big Local plans have to be needs and evidence-led and reflect a wide range of community interests, rather than 'whims' of individuals' or sectional interests: *'There is an emphasis at the moment on promoting the arts in [names Big Local] but I think that is more a reflection on the interests of the partners and workers, rather than the community'*.

Others talked of informal approaches creating a lack of transparency. Conversely, it was noted that a Big Local partnership's preoccupation with accountability for the money contributed to slow progress, with as much attention, if not more, paid to process and structures than delivery. This focus on accountability is often a reaction to external pressures, as explored further in [Reflections on 'resident led' change \(Paper One\)](#) and the 2018 film, [Big Local: talking about resident led change](#)

Relationships

As Big Local has evolved, there is evidence that partnerships are starting to build meaningful relationships with external bodies. One local authority officer recalled how the Big Local had asked '*can we do it together?*' This was seen as a sea change in the history of resident-council relationships, and despite some members of the council initially finding it a challenge to work more closely with residents, better working practices have resulted e.g. there is widespread agreement about the synergy of community and council contributions to the regeneration of Whitley Bay's seafront; (see [interviewees in Whitley Bay](#)).

Such relationships can, however, be fragile. They may be founded on personal relationships rather than embedded into decision making processes and mechanisms. Cuts to services and jobs can mean that time invested in building collaborative relationships breaks down. Likewise, a change in councillors and officers can alter (both positively and negatively) perceptions about Big Local and create the need to build a whole new set of relationships.

Selection of Big Local areas

Some of those interviewed were part of the selection process for the Big Local area. As such, they generally had a good understanding about Big Local, were clear about why a particular area was chosen and what the programme aimed trying to achieve. They also had some interesting stories to tell. In seven of our 15 case study areas, respondents noted that once the announcement was made that 'x' area would be getting a million pounds, council colleagues (whether at a parish/town, district or unitary level) wanted to direct what happened in the area, saw the money as an opportunity to respond to some of their own agendas and in some cases had drawn up plans for how the money was to be spent – '*a shopping list,*' as one local authority officer put it. Some officers took on the role of protective Big Local 'bodyguards,' trying to hold true to, and advocate for, the resident-led ethos of Big Local.

Those who were not involved in the selection process, however, were often confused about why a particular area was selected and had little understanding about the fact that it was often their colleagues who made the decision. Nor have they always understood the purpose, ethos or processes of the Big Local programme. This is particularly true in some local authorities where, despite playing a role in the choice of area, little responsibility has been taken for then communicating what Big Local was about to their officers working in the area.

Adding value

Some external stakeholders were positive or critical depending upon how they saw Big Local fulfilling their own agenda. Unsurprisingly, many respondents appreciated how Big Local adds value to their own area of work. Interviewees included representatives from town and parish councils, district and borough councils, and from upper tier county councils and unitary authorities. There were a lot of positive comments about the Big Local approach made at each

level. One councillor was '*entranced*' by *Big Local*'. It was '*...absolutely amazing...*' in how it helped him in his role as a councillor - and vice versa (see also [Lawrence Weston Community Plan Launch](#) 2018 film). For another, close liaison with Big Local was a '*no brainer*', as it represented a low cost and quick way of accessing a range of community views. Examples include the contribution Big Local has made to a public service extending its 'reach' into the community; acting as a vehicle for delivering an authority's localism and neighbourhoods agenda; and Big Local consultations helping inform council priorities and activities. One Big Local, for instance, runs events and activities from the local library which means that it can stay open for self-service book loans and other services for longer hours than the library service itself could offer.

There were a number of comments about Big Local being a good example of how some funding, and some support to develop ideas, has made a real difference in the community. Interviewees noted the importance of local ownership and passion, and how local authorities and Big Local activists can work together and complement each other: '*if you have got someone from within the community who is so passionate about it, it is head and shoulders above any other work as a local authority that we could do, or try to engage with local people*' (Officer, County Council). Similarly, another council officer observed of the Big Local achievements that '*we have been trying to work to these kind of outcomes for years*'. Others spoke of the potential of networks and trust for creating change: '*Relationships have been built - bringing people together acts as a catalyst for other things*' (Officer, Unitary Authority).

It is worth noting that there are some concerns about sustaining the projects started by Big Local (for example, maintaining park equipment funded by Big Local) but there is also some awareness that the legacy will more than the tangible and the physical: '*The legacy will be a good honest working relationship between [the BL neighbourhood] and the council*'.

The well connected Big Local?

Big Local areas are small and therefore broader influence can be problematic – for example for one person, Big Local was '*a drop in the ocean*' locally. Similarly, when external stakeholders were asked if they perceived the Big Local partnership to be any more significant than other community groups such as tenants and residents' associations, several said 'no'. Generally, criticism of Big Local areas tended to refer to their inward focus, and, related to this, the very small area they covered. This did not necessarily make sense to those with bigger strategic objectives or a broader geographical remit. Indeed, in large urban areas, Big Local may simply be '*one of many voices struggling to be heard, and needs to stand out from the crowd*' (Local Government Officer). They also suggested that there was a lack of understanding amongst those involved in Big Local about how, and why, strategic decisions are made and by whom; and of the pressures faced by councils.

On the other hand, elected members were particularly positive about the programme where they saw Big Local as an intermediary - a mechanism, or platform for:

- the local authority to access the community in a broad sense, rather than different sectional interests within communities,
- giving credibility, through a partnership's 'endorsement', to external agencies who had, in the past, been 'parachuted into neighbourhoods',
- enabling local authorities to deliver a range of policy objectives at a time of cuts – from community cohesion, through to environmental improvements (or maintenance),
- a strategic fit (whether Big Local areas recognised this or not) between community aspirations as embedded in Big Local plans and the authorities' localism and devolution strategies.

Such themes also emerged in interviews with people working more at a project delivery level, rather than in policy and planning. For them, Big Local played a similar role of being a conduit between local groups and agencies, a mechanism for building and strengthening local networks and co-ordinating responses to local issues. They also noted that Big Local could influence operational decisions (e.g. how local services were delivered) rather than at a wider, strategic, policy level.

Perceptions around resident led change

In many areas there has been a conscious decision to keep the partnership 'resident only' (see Paper One: Reflections on Resident-Led). The rationale for this largely relates to concerns that officers or councillors would dominate the decision-making process, undermining resident confidence. Councillors, in particular, were often critical of the fact that they had not been invited to be part of the partnership, and / or (in those areas with parish and town councils) felt undermined or side-stepped by the setting up of a separate Big Local partnership. Another common theme amongst strategic stakeholders was that if the Big Local area wanted to achieve long term strategic goals, it needed council involvement somehow, albeit with an understanding that councillors or officers may need to step back at key points, and that building trust takes time.

Not everyone felt this way. There were some who were very positive about how the Big Local approach promoted a sense of community ownership of the programme locally, which could make a difference in the long term for legacy and sustainability. A council leader for example, was very positive about the fact that Big Local enables people to '*get involved, drop out, it is theirs and not owned by the Town Hall*'. This ownership of Big Local was seen as one of its potentially distinguishing features, though not without its challenges. There was awareness from some external stakeholders that local authorities facing budget cuts could try to exploit the Big Local programme in terms of pushing down statutory responsibilities to residents and transfer of assets that were deemed unviable. One councillor, for example, noted that '*more and more policy delivery is being driven down to communities*' without questions being

raised about how appropriate this was without very long-term investment in building local capacities, particularly in the most deprived neighbourhoods. Others noted that many of the problems faced in Big Local areas were the result of decisions taken elsewhere (for example, decisions on cuts to services) and that such problems could not be resolved at the hyper-local level.

Balancing the voices of councillors, agencies and residents is complex - whose voice is heard, or prevails? As one local authority officer commented in respect of his Big Local programme: *'If agencies had made decisions, would a play park have been a priority? No. But it is a fine balance.'*

Concluding thoughts

Given that Big Local is a flexible and locally driven programme, and amounts to a relatively small amount of money i.e. approximately £65,000 per year, it is unsurprising that there was no clear pattern of responses amongst the 70 external stakeholders interviewed. There was praise and criticism across all respondents, irrespective of their work context or the quality of their relationship with Big Local. Some were 'gushing' about Big Local, some were supportive in principle but frustrated in practice, others were sceptical about the Big Local model. Corresponding remarks related to how Big Local was helping stakeholders achieve their own aims e.g. *'...a source of community intelligence'*, a few were more explicit about progress towards achieving community owned aspirations, e.g. *'The community owes this project so much'*; and some were dismissive, e.g. *'... an opportunity missed'*.

Stakeholder views were also influenced by their understanding and expectations of Big Local. For example, it was reported that some colleagues only saw the money side of Big Local - one person noted that local councillors saw Big Local as a 'cash cow' or enabled the local authority to divert scarce resources to areas without Big Local monies. There were several instances of confusion around roles (for example, whether the LTO was Big Local); some interviewees had no awareness of a Big Local partnership – Big Local was seen as the workers' project. Several people were disappointed that Big Local partnerships were not acting strategically enough and were described as 'naïve' in terms of understanding the power (or lack of power) of particularly second tier local authorities and their decision making processes.

There was a sense from several interviews that Big Local could not succeed without more involvement from external stakeholders (e.g. voluntary and public sector workers) and needed to develop relationships with local businesses. There may or may not be some truth in this, but it is apparent that for those steeped in the culture of a local authority, voluntary sector infrastructure, and partnership working, it can be easy to find fault with Big Local partnerships. Very few stakeholders recognised that for many residents this is all new or acknowledged that the political landscape can be very complicated e.g. Grassland Hasmoor Big Local works with one parish council, two borough councils and one county council, whilst the changing political and

democratic structure in Cambridgeshire will effectively result in 4 tiers of governance through which Ramsey Million has to navigate.

There is evidence that some learning is being drawn from Big Local by external bodies e.g. '*Learning about needing tolerance and taking time*', but the number of interviewees who felt they had something to learn from Big Local was small – indeed, many seemed surprised to be asked the question e.g.: *Not sure how the council can learn from Big Local if not involved.*

Whilst systematic learning from Big Local was not reported by external stakeholders, in a majority of the 15 areas involved in the evaluation, elected members and officers viewed Big Local as a useful conduit for consultation, and brokering relationships, with local communities beyond sectional, or single issue, interest groups.

This research raises further questions:

- how much responsibility for policy delivery can Big Local, and residents 'bear'; and what is 'reasonable' for external organisations to expect?
- how/can hyper-local initiatives such as Big Local inform strategic policy making where there may be a mis-match between aspirations for localism and existing power and decision making structures? Or is it sufficient that the programme is seen as delivering localism?
- what is the added value of the patient investment of Big Local funding for communities and for potential partner agencies? How can this be evidenced?
- if a Big Local partnership is embedded in a community and has the trust of residents, do the views of external stakeholders matter – or, in terms of the future of community led change, is there a major task to explain Big Local more fully to those stakeholders? In short, to adopt the terminology of the [New Local Government Network report](#) (2018), how/can Big Local areas and Local Trust itself contribute to '*rebalancing the power*' between councils and communities?

Notes

¹ It is worth noting that Big Local partnerships interpreted the term 'strategic stakeholders' in different ways. Only a minority of areas had high level political and officer contacts, and a majority nominated local delivery partners or agencies instead. Where this happened, the research team itself identified key officers and politicians for interview.

Appendix

Profile of External Stakeholders interviewed

Position	
MP	5
Councillor - Primary Authority (Unitary/County)	10
Councillor – District/Borough Council	5
Councillor – Town/Parish Council	3
Local Government Officer - Unitary	14
Local Government Officer - District	4
Local Government Officer – Town and Parish	2
Non-Departmental Public Body	2
Other Statutory (Clinical Commissioning Group/School Head	6
Voluntary Sector	12
Faith group	2
Private sector/social business	3
Other (universities with connections with Big Local)	2
Total	70