
The role of paid workers in supporting a community-led programme

A version of this paper was published internally by Local Trust in July 2022. This version has been lightly edited to make it accessible for a general audience, with core terms and concepts explained wherever possible. Please refer to [our website](#) for more information about the structure and goals of Local Trust. Since this report was written, the role of the rep and the context in which they are working has changed, although many aspects that this report has highlighted remain important. Where there has been a significant change, this is noted in the footnotes.

Introduction

The Big Local programme aims to put more power, resource and decision-making in the hands of local communities by awarding 150 areas across England £1.15m to spend over 10-15 years. The work is led by local volunteers, who form Big Local partnerships to determine the overall direction and priorities of Big Local. In the years since the programme began, most Big Local partnerships have chosen to use a portion of their grant to fund paid staff to support the delivery of Big Local in their communities.

The Big Local model is structured around a triangle approach made up of local residents (the Big Local partnership), Local Trust as the funder, and a Locally Trusted Organisation (LTO)¹. It is entirely the partnership's decision if they choose to fund paid workers, and where this occurs, the worker is generally contracted to and managed by the LTO, with agreements in place to define the relationship between the partnership and the paid staff.

This paper draws on three main sources of data to explore the role Big Local workers play in supporting resident-led decision-making and how they ensure power resides in local communities:

- A survey of Big Local workers delivered in 2018 which explored who Big Local workers are and the tasks and roles they take on.

¹ A locally trusted organisation is the organisation chosen by people in a Big Local area or the partnership to administer and account for funding, and/or deliver activities or services on behalf of a partnership.

- Updated data on the number of Big Local workers and the tasks they deliver gathered via a survey completed by Big Local reps in summer 2021.²
- Qualitative fieldwork and initial analysis on the role of workers delivered by [WSA Community Consultants](#) for Local Trust between October 2021 and March 2022 (see appendix for more details).

These data sources have been pulled together in this paper to explore and answer the following research questions:

- How do Big Local workers contribute to ensuring power resides in local communities?
- To what extent do Big Local workers enable resident-led decision-making through performing their roles well?
- What are the values, skills and attributes that Big Local workers need to best be able to support resident-led decision-making?

The findings in this paper will contribute to wider Local Trust research reviewing and defining the support needed to enable community control. Looking beyond the programme, Big Local can also serve as a unique case study in the role that a paid workforce can play in other volunteer-led community programmes delivered at a local or hyperlocal level.

Context

How many Big Local workers are there?

Data collected by Local Trust in summer 2021 found that 135 out of 150 Big Local areas (90%) were employing at least one paid staff member to support them with delivering Big Local in their community. Many Big Local areas employ multiple staff, with the same survey reporting 265 paid workers across Big Local areas. While a minority (12%) reported 4 or more paid members of staff, 70% of areas were reported to be paying for one or two staff members from their Big Local funds (Local Trust, 2021).

Who are Big Local workers?

The 2018 survey for Big Local workers was estimated to have had a response rate of around 60% of eligible respondents. It identified that:

“Big Local workers are predominantly non-residents (73%), employees of an organisation (84%), female (72%), aged between 45 and 54 (54%), white (87%), with experience in carrying out similar work (73%) and educated to degree level (59%).” (Local Trust, 2019: p.2)

What tasks do Big Local workers do?

For this research, data was also collected about the main tasks that Big Local workers do in their role. This is detailed in the table below. This aligns with data gathered through the 2018 survey of Big Local workers where 83% of respondents said they “work face-to-face in the community” however the 2018 research also found that “workers carry out similar tasks to each other regardless of what they feel the majority of their role involves.” (Local Trust, 2019: p.4).

² Big Local reps are individuals appointed by Local Trust to offer tailored support to a Big Local area and share successes, challenges and news with the organisation.

Table 1: What are the main roles of Big Local workers?

Which of the below tasks forms the majority of what that worker does for the Big Local partnership, even if it is not included in their job description/role? (Please select up to 3 responses)	
Building relationships and networks with other community stakeholders (e.g., local council, local VCOs)	62%
Community engagement	60%
Administration and finance (inc. supporting with partnership meetings and monitoring spend)	52%
Project based – general (i.e., across a range of different projects and activities)	41%
Project based – specific (e.g., youth work, financial advice, creative projects)	23%
Fundraising	21%
Managing or running a hub or other community asset	20%
Governance (e.g., if partnership is/has set up a legal entity)	8%
None of the above	1%

The tasks in the table above show there is a clear difference between the capacity-adding role of a Big Local worker and the voluntary, decision-making role that Big Local partnership members have. As mentioned above, there is no obligation or expectation that a Big Local partnership funds paid roles. However, partnerships are made up of residents acting in a voluntary capacity, meaning that most Big Locals workers are funded with the explicit aim of boosting capacity across specific or multiple aspects of Big Local activity in order to deliver a partnership’s Big Local plan.³

Recognising the intended distinction between the role of Big Local workers and the role of partnership members, data collected in 2021 asked Big Local reps for their perspectives on the influence that workers have over decisions made by the partnership. 86% said the worker(s) provided an appropriate level of influence while 95% reported a good working relationship between the partnership and the worker(s) (Local Trust, 2021). Overall, this paints a positive picture of Big Local partnership’s experience of funding and working alongside paid staff.

This paper draws on the above quantitative data gathered in 2018 and 2021 around Big Local workers and looks at what these positive experiences and relationships mean about the role of workers on the Big Local programme, in particular looking at how they contribute to community power and enable resident-led decision-making.

How do Big Local workers contribute to ensuring power resides in local communities?

The Big Local programme aims to increase power in communities by putting resources and decision-making in the hands of local people. Resident-led decision-making is a key component of a powerful community, alongside a community which is:

³ Each Big Local partnership is required to produce a plan. It is a document they write for themselves, their community, and Local Trust. It is a guide and action plan that the partnership can follow, share, and use to get others involved.

“Proactive and empowered to make change, open, inclusive and welcoming and having a voice that is heard” (Wilson et al, 2022a: p.1) and “groups working together for the benefit of the community [to tackle] challenges together.” (Wilson et al, 2022a: p.6).

The primary function of Big Local workers according to the Big Local partnerships that fund them is to provide additional capacity to supplement the strategic decision-making taken on by volunteer partnership members. This all takes place in the context of a programme that specifically seeks to enable resident-led decision-making. This section explores the support Big Local workers provide, and how it contributes to ensuring power resides in local communities, through the following tasks:

- Through community engagement
- Through administration and processes
- Through project management and delivery

Through community engagement

In order to draw down Big Local funding, Local Trust asks that partnerships draw up plans in consultation with the community. This requires a great deal of capacity for volunteer partnership members, so it makes sense that 60% of Big Local worker’s roles involve them being out in the community, engaging with community members to establish and understand needs, in particular from underrepresented voices (Local Trust: 2021) By doing this work on behalf of the partnership, this helps partnership members to understand how they are progressing against their Big Local plan, what needs in the community they may like to address, or what other organisations may exist locally that they can work alongside. Research from the *Our Bigger Story* project identifies some form of worker support as a key aspect to developing community power, recognising the large amount of capacity that is needed to engage people across the local community (Wilson et al, 2022a).

“They’ll feed [information from the community] back to us and then that helps us make decisions on what the need is because a lot of us around the decision-making table are either working or haven’t got the time to be able to go out and speak to all these groups on a continuous basis.” - Big Local partnership member

As well as gathering information for the purposes of the partnership, Big Local workers may also play an important promotional role for Big Local in the community, speaking about and advertising activities or events that the community can be a part of, as well as building networks and connections between local community organisations and the partnership.

“[Their role is] mainly to make sure that residents in the area and the community groups and everybody across the patch was aware about what the [Big Local partnership] was all about and how we could help them, support them. And it was [the worker’s] job to go out and spend a lot of time over the weeks and months

and years to build this relationship up and get the message out there.” - Big Local partnership member.

Through community engagement, Big Local workers can also play a role in encouraging community members to see themselves as local experts and seeking new ideas that can be taken back to the Big Local partnership. Some Big Local workers adopt an explicit asset-based community development approach⁴ (ABCD) which involves “the community identifying and being part of the solution to the problem that they themselves are facing.” By building and maintaining these connections, Big Local workers can provide an important link into partnerships for residents in the area who are interested in playing more of a role in local decision-making.

Through administration and processes

Administrative support from Big Local workers allows residents to focus on decisions being made around the table, rather than technical aspects of partnership meetings. Data gathered in 2021 showed that over half of Big Local workers performed administrative roles. This could include governance processes such as providing updates or papers, taking minutes and ensuring decisions made are quorate. During partnership meetings, many workers may also play a facilitating or mediating role in discussions, ensuring that conversations are productive and positive. This was noted in the fieldwork to have been an even more important role for workers as partnership meetings moved online during the COVID-19 pandemic. These more practical and relational roles may even overlap, with more than one worker referring to how they use minute-taking to prompt clear decision-making during partnership meetings.

“[I] can question under the guise of minute-taking. ‘Could you just confirm that decision for the record?’ Whereas before it was just a mess...you could hardly get to what a decision was.” - Big Local worker

Alongside their role in supporting and providing updates during Big Local partnership meetings, many workers seek to support resident-led decision-making by introducing strong communication structures and processes so partnership members can engage *between* meetings. These will vary according to the needs and priorities of the partnership, but options raised in the fieldwork included WhatsApp groups and weekly catchups with the chair of the partnership board or partnership members involved in specific projects or activities. These additional communication structures are useful in giving opportunities for decision-making to take place between meetings which maintains momentum in projects and also offers transparency around decision-making both within the partnership and in the wider community.

“So, partners feel comfortable in that there’s transparency, what is happening, where the money is going, and if there are

⁴ ‘Assets’ in this sense are the various resources already available in a community. An asset-based approach is one that builds upon the strengths and resources that already exist in a given community, rather than aiming to build them from the ground up.

particular projects or concerns [they] are being addressed because it is very open.” - Big Local worker.

Workers also reported playing a role in supporting partnership members to consider how to make their processes more accessible to the wider community by supporting the partnership to reflect on how their decision-making may be affected if they are a small, homogenous group. Some workers reported how they had successfully worked alongside partnership chairs to open up partnership meetings and encouraged more members of the local community to join or engage with Big Local. Examples that came out of the fieldwork included workers opening up conversations with their partnerships around how to adjust the formality of meetings, the meeting experience (such as room layout) and the location of meetings to make volunteering as a partnership member more appealing to others in the community (see also: Lyon et al, 2021).

“It’s our responsibility to recognise that not everybody wants to come to a board meeting.” - Big Local worker

Through project management and delivery

One of the most common ways that Big Local workers support resident-led decision-making is by taking a role in delivering and progressing projects and activities funded by the Big Local partnership. At least 40% of workers perform project-based tasks, (Local Trust, 2021) but the fieldwork also indicated that most Big Local workers carry out some kind of task that enable projects to be delivered. This could include project or contract management, risk assessment, social media management, promotional work, managing small grants processes or relationship management, as well as Big Local specific tasks such as supporting plan development and financial reporting. There is also a further 23% of workers who have been recruited to deliver project-specific activity such as on arts or youth projects (Local Trust, 2021). As with their role in engaging the community, many Big Local workers have been funded in order to directly increase the capacity of the partnership to meet the needs of the community by delivering projects and activities that meet their strategic objectives.

When progressing decisions, ideas and priorities developed by the Big Local partnership, Big Local workers may do this alongside key or interested partnership members or may deliver projects single-handedly or through reaching out to other groups or organisations in the community. Working alongside partnership members or local residents to deliver projects and activities can be an important way to ensure power lies in local communities as not only have local residents decided how resources will be spent in that community, they also can benefit from skill and capacity building from their involvement in project delivery.

Some workers in the fieldwork spoke of doing this by taking a partnership member’s specific passion, such as gardening, and supporting them to develop the networks and skills to be able to turn this into a way to meet the partnership’s priorities, such as through a community growing project. This can grow confidence and community leadership in an environment that feels supportive and interesting for those volunteering their time.

Other workers spoke of how they were able to link their community engagement roles into wider project delivery, for example, by supporting those in the community to develop ideas so they are able to pitch to the partnership for a small grant. The below quote came from a worker who supported some local residents to set up a new group in the community when they struggled to receive support from other local organisations. It demonstrates the value

to the individuals involved, beyond the creation of a new volunteer-led group in the community.

“What they also did was they built their own confidence, they networked, they learned new skills, they had new experiences.”

Big Local worker.

While in some Big Local areas partnership members will play a role in the development or delivery phase, this is not always the case and other partnerships are happy to effectively ‘hand over’ an idea for a project or activity with the expectation that the worker will take it on rather than themselves.

“We give them tasks to do, and they’re able to go away and do it, and there might obviously [be times when they] come back with questions and queries but the majority of the time we’re quite happy as a partnership to allow them to work freely and go out and do what’s needed.” - Big Local partnership member

In instances where partnership members hand over ideas or projects to the worker, or the worker progresses these on behalf of the partnership, this may mean the worker ends up taking on a greater portion of operational or ‘day-to-day’ decision-making. This adds a degree of complexity to the question of how workers support resident-led decision-making, as some partnership members, recognising their capacity as volunteers, are happy to primarily be involved in strategic or high-level decision-making only. Indeed, this may be one of the reasons why they recruited a worker or workers in the first place, particularly for those roles that may require specific technical knowledge such as running a café or managing an asset transfer. For workers themselves, they see the need for an important balance between ensuring partnership involvement in strategic versus day-to-day decisions. Partnership preference, type of project or activity and the importance of progress and momentum all have to be factored into this.

“The harder part is getting some of the partnership to join in with the planning and running of things – and at a consistent level, as they often flit between the strategic and the micro-management depending on the activity!” - Big Local worker

This section has demonstrated that workers best support resident-led decision-making when they ensure that strategic decisions continue to be made by the partnership and that taking on the responsibility of community engagement, project administration or project delivery does not come at the expense of residents taking the lead in the community. Instead, it is important that the tasks and roles delivered by Big Local workers are done in a way that actually increase the opportunities for community power through enabling resident-led decision-making and the building of community capacity. When this works well, workers are an important way for Big Local partnerships to add more capacity for delivery in the community and they act as an extension of the LTO role as originally envisaged by Local

Trust – a way in which local residents can be relieved of the burdens of key tasks and processes, allowing them to focus primarily on decision-making in their community (Dobson et al, 2022).

The next section looks at ways in which Big Local workers can further enable resident-led decision-making or make it more difficult through their support of Big Local partnerships.

To what extent do Big Local workers enable resident-led decision-making through performing their roles well?

The above section demonstrated the tasks that Big Local workers deliver that can contribute to wider community power. This section outlines how these roles and responsibilities can be delivered in ways that can better facilitate or can act as a barrier to resident-led decision-making. It looks at the way in which Big Local workers can:

- Enable decision-making rather than leading it
- Build the skills and capacities of Big Local partnership members
- Engage the community and advocate for Big Local values

It is important to note that broadly speaking Big Local workers do enable resident-led decision-making. Data gathered by Local Trust found that 86% of Big Local reps felt that the worker(s) in their Big Local area provide an appropriate level of influence in decisions made by the partnership, and 94% reported a good working relationship between workers and their Big Local partnership. However, there are a small number of areas where Big Local workers are playing less of a supporting role and are not enabling resident-led decision-making on the programme.

Enabling rather than leading decision-making

The previous section began to draw on the difficult balance between how workers can support resident-led decision-making on a day-to-day versus strategic level. Part of this relies on clear communication between the partnership and worker on roles and responsibilities and the worker valuing and recognising the importance of resident-led decision-making.

“Where this is not the case, there can be circumstances where partnership members feel workers are taking on too great of a decision-making role and this can lead to a breakdown of trust and cause conflict within Big Local partnerships, such as in the *Our Bigger Story* research which reported one partnership that began to hold resident-only partnership meetings out of a concern that “workers might have become too influential.” (McCabe et al, 2020: p.39).

It is important to note that even when partnership members may feel broadly satisfied with the level of decision-making they are involved in, slippage can occur which results in resident-led decision-making being limited, intentionally or otherwise, by a paid worker.

“It always goes to the partnership board. [Decisions] will get sign off fairly easily but the staff drive it.” - Big Local rep

While there may be clear expectations from the partnership that paid workers take on a large delivery role recognising their lack of capacity to do so at that time, research as part of the *Our Bigger Story* project found that, in some areas, “power and responsibility has shifted to paid workers with partnership members trusting that “they can let the worker get on with it,” (McCabe et al, 2021: p.20). Workers taking on more decision-making can create an almost spiral effect that leads to partnership members beginning to expect the worker to play a bigger role in strategic decisions about what the Big Local delivers and how it does this. This can particularly be the case if there are existing challenges to resident-led decision-making such as a partnership that is low on capacity to meet and make decisions, or a partnership that is dealing with internal conflicts.

“I do think the partnership...has been incredibly passive...because their staff get on with it, they do tend to sit back and let them. And if they can see it all happening, they don't see that they need to do more to engage with it and I understand the logic of that.” - Big Local rep

By trying to find the correct balance for partnership members so they are able to be involved in decision-making without feeling overwhelmed as volunteers, Big Local workers can seek to ensure that whatever role the partnership would like the worker to play in Big Local activities is a conscious decision, considered and made by the whole partnership. Recent *Our Bigger Story* research referred to this as workers playing an:

“Enabling (rather than leading) role in supporting the Big Local partnership to make decisions about how they will meet the needs of their local community.” (Wilson et al, 2022a: p.19).

Building the skills and capacity of partnership members

A key role Big Local workers may have is to bring their own technical knowledge and expertise to the delivery of the Big Local programme. In doing this, they increase the capacity of the partnership to deliver projects, and to deliver them well. A Big Local worker playing an ‘enabling’ role is one that aims to also build the skills and capacity of partnership members in a way that contributes to community power. Where a worker takes on too much control over the decisions that are made by a Big Local partnership this hinders the opportunities for partnership members to develop their skills and confidence. One Big Local rep involved in the research specifically spoke about how a reliance on worker expertise and information to direct decision-making can make partnership members feel less confident to put forward their own ideas or raise issues or points of debate in partnership meetings.

“The board aren't sufficiently confident or developed that they are able to really assert their authority on things.” - Big Local rep

The previous section identified the benefits for skill-building that can come from partnership members or other residents in the community supporting Big Local workers to deliver projects or activities, and the fieldwork raised the suggestion that workers should be “willing

and able to adopt a coaching or mentoring to suit and support the chair and resident partnership members". However, partnership members themselves can be a barrier to Big Local workers building the knowledge, skills and capacity of the partnership and wider community, as they may not see it as an important role for their Big Local worker or would simply prefer the worker to focus on other responsibilities.

"I don't see that primarily as their role, possibly a secondary [consequence] but they have enough to do. Once you open that door, they become trainers and they get distracted from the work they have to do." - Big Local partnership member.

Yet workers can still encourage skill-building for partnership members outside of direct coaching and mentoring by suggesting development opportunities for partnership members, such as encouraging engagement with Local Trust's learning and networking opportunities or signposting to local networks that may be of benefit to local residents. It was also noted during the fieldwork that some of the ways in which partnership members gain knowledge and skills from Big Local workers could be through observing how the worker delivers administrative or project management functions for the partnership, such as working with external stakeholders or supporting the partnership to reflect and review an activity or event they have delivered.

A further way that Big Local workers can make resident-led decision-making more difficult is by choosing not to play a role in building the skills and capacity of partnership members. This may be because workers, and potentially also LTOs as seen in the below example, have limited expectations of what skill-building in the community could look like, focusing on formal training rather than more experiential forms of learning

"There's been attempts, they've commissioned training and the attendance has been appalling" - LTO representative

Furthermore, if the worker is chiefly dedicated to project delivery, they may not feel they have the time to identify or fill gaps in partnership members knowledge, choosing instead to focus on "getting things done". This can contribute to the previously mentioned 'spiral effect' where workers take on more decision-making and delivery responsibility rather than skilling-up partnership members to make more informed or more efficient decisions. This can then result in fewer decisions being made by partnership members.

"We had our AGM last week, all very much led around the partnership doing that and we tried to step aside, but what came across was there had been no planning, nothing was going to happen and so we had to step in." - Big Local worker

Engaging the community and advocating for Big Local values

A key value of the Big Local programme is that it is resident-led by those who live, work and play in the local area. On the ground, this requires local residents to be aware of Big Local in their community, and how they can feed in and get involved. Engaging the community

and building relationships and networks with stakeholders are the two most common tasks Big Local workers perform in their roles (Local Trust: 2021). When done well, this includes sharing Big Local values about residents taking the lead and encouraging local organisations or bodies to adopt a similar approach. For the community, communicating Big Local values can play a really important role in increasing resident engagement in decision-making or other forms of community involvement, such as volunteering.

However, in cases where paid staff are the public face of Big Local, many in the community may not know about the partnership or resident volunteers that sit behind it. In the fieldwork, partnership members spoke of how their communities often think the worker or LTO is delivering activities or creating change in their area. This can also lead to mistrust and misunderstanding when it is not clear who is making decisions about the Big Local funding that has been allocated for the community. This makes community engagement an even bigger challenge and creates a greater detachment between the partnership and the wider community and can lead to workers taking on even more decision-making responsibility citing their closeness to the community as justification for this. Relatedly, strong worker roles can also mean local residents are less willing to take on decision-making responsibility, as they do not see the possibility of residents taking the lead in the community.

“[A community member] suggested they would like to start a Neighbourhood Watch. Unfortunately, these residents...thought that somebody else would do it for them.” - Big Local worker

Where the worker takes on a greater decision-making role or Big Local is publicly seen to be “the worker’s project” (McCabe et al, 2019: p.7), this can affect the perspective of the LTO or local organisations and agencies about what can be achieved by working with and giving decision-making power to local residents. Part of the aim of the Big Local programme is to showcase the benefits of this approach but this is made more difficult when local residents are not acknowledged as decision-makers or power-holders by local stakeholders.

With Big Local workers often being a bigger “presence in the community” than the Big Local partnership due to holding a paid role rather than a volunteer one, it is quite likely that in many Big Local areas they will be involved in a greater proportion of engagement with the local community and key stakeholders. Therefore, it is important that Big Local workers understand their role in the Big Local programme and are able to communicate and advocate for the value of resident-led decision-making.

“The spotlight is not on you. You’re only there to support whatever [the partnership] need.” - Big Local worker

As highlighted throughout this section, the way in which Big Local workers take on their roles and responsibilities can make resident-led decision-making more or less likely. By failing to invest in partnership members or not allowing residents to be involved in strategic decisions, Big Local workers can also limit community power, and prevent the kind of community capacity building that the Big Local programme is intended to deliver. However, when working well, the role of a Big Local worker can be integral to freeing up the capacity of local residents to make big decisions about addressing and prioritising need in their community, as well as helping them build their confidence and skills to make a difference in

their local area. Considering the ways in which Big Local workers best enable resident-led decision-making as highlighted above, the next section looks at the skills, attributes and values that workers need to do this.

What are the values, skills and attributes that Big Local workers need to be able to best support resident-led decision-making?

This paper has so far identified the role that Big Local workers can play in supporting resident-led decision-making, what this means for community power and what the implications can be when those in worker roles do not support residents taking the lead. This final section looks at what Big Local workers need in order to best support resident-led decision-making in local communities. These may be traits that can be inherent to an individual, or skills and values that have been built over time, with many Big Local areas identifying the benefits of recruiting staff with previous community development experience or who are residents in the community in which they work.

Values

During the fieldwork for this piece, partnership members, workers and reps alike all spoke of how important it was that Big Local workers had passion for and commitment to the community and the Big Local project itself. Other themes were harder to verbalise, such as around a shared values and vision, but these often appeared to be close to the Big Local ethos, essentially an enthusiasm for resident-led decision-making and putting power into the hands of the community.

“The clues in the title: it’s a resident led programme. You’ve got to really keep in mind that you are only there to be a part of a support network... You were only ever there [to] support whatever they need.” - Big Local worker

For many Big Local areas, previous experience of practicing these values was essential. Local Trust’s 2018 survey of workers found that 73% had previous experience in a similar role (Local Trust, 2019), and our fieldwork for this piece showed past experience in community development was still an important attribute for Big Local partnerships, even where workers were not in explicit community engagement roles. Partnership members in one area spoke about how there were issues with a previous worker who came from a local authority background and struggled to understand what the partnership was asking of them and how to go about engaging the community in a less formal way. They had since recruited a worker from a community development background who was much more successful in the role and was also going on to support a further member of administrative staff with developing their community engagement skills. It is generally felt within partnerships that having a community development background means the worker is more patient with the pace of progress on the programme, more adept at supporting resident-led decision-making and is more likely to have the values and passion identified above. It also provides a solid basis for a trusting relationship between the partnership and the worker that is built on mutual respect and a shared understanding of both party’s perspective. This seems to be the norm across Big Local areas, with Big Local reps reporting that a good working relationship between workers and Big Local partnerships in 94% of areas (Local Trust, 2021).

Skills

As highlighted above, Big Local partnerships often recruit paid staff in order to provide additional capacity that they are not able to deliver themselves as volunteers. Skills in

project management, administration and relationship building are commonly required of Big Local workers. These allow newly recruited staff to hit the ground running with supporting the partnership which in turn means partnership members are better able to focus on their decision-making role and areas of delivery that interest them. This is even more the case where workers with specific technical skills are required by the partnership, such as youth workers or staff to run community cafés. There are often key aspects of a Big Local partnership's projects and activities that it would be unfeasible to expect partnership members to be able to deliver as a volunteer. By bringing in paid staff to ensure these projects are delivered well, partnership members are able to focus on more strategic decisions, rather than day-to-day decisions, as well as developing skills around delegation and project oversight.

A further skill that paid workers for Big Local need is the ability to work flexibly or adapt quickly to changing or new contexts.

"I think the main thing is just this willingness to, or ability to switch gears and to learn different things, be flexible...also the ability to work between and negotiate with groups that may have different priorities and experiences, diverse needs." - Big Local worker

The COVID-19 pandemic showed how quickly partnerships may need to adapt what they are doing, forge new networks and relationships and begin delivering differently. In a more day-to-day sense, partnership members, chairs and external stakeholders can all change over time. A key part of the relational role of workers can be to mitigate the effects of these changes for the wider partnership and ensure the decision-making role of the partnership is still able to take place despite changes to their internal or external context.

"[Workers need the] ability to work within the uncertainties and fluidity of complex relationships with stakeholders." - Big Local rep

Being a resident in the Big Local area

Data gathered by Local Trust in 2021 found that around 25% of Big Local workers were residents of the Big Local area they were employed in, and some partnerships involved in the research reported making an explicit point of recruiting workers who live in the Big Local area. Findings from a 2018 survey of Big Local workers stated that workers who were residents of the Big Local area were more likely to have been involved in Big Local as a partnership member or in a volunteering role before they became employed (Local Trust, 2019).

For some Big Local partnerships, recruiting a local resident has real benefits. Many areas spoke of their resident workers having a greater enthusiasm and passion for the community than their experience with non-resident workers, and their knowledge, information and connections of the local community was invaluable.

"I think our group is better for having residents as workers. Which is definitely a benefit for us. Someone knowing the terrain, the people, what's going on in schools and the community helps us come to decisions." - Big Local partnership member

The fieldwork also uncovered how resident workers were also seen as an example of how skill and capacity had been built in the community, and a way to show the community the assets that can exist in their local area.

“We wanted to hire local people and we wanted to hire people that had a connection, that could help us with uplifting [the Big Local area] in whatever way.” - Big Local partnership member

The 2018 survey of Big Local workers found that those who were residents were less likely than their non-resident counterparts to have a degree or previous experience of working in community development (Local Trust, 2019), showing that Big Local has, to an extent, contributed to the development of a new pool of community development workers across England. However, the comparative inexperience of resident workers has sometimes caused challenges for Big Local partnerships. Some of those areas who have policies around *only* recruiting workers from the local community have found that they “haven’t always got the best person for the job” and have struggled with issues around professionalism, confidentiality, and general workplace skills. Workers in this circumstance also reported feeling they can never “switch off” as they go about their day-to-day lives in the same area in which they work. This highlights how the recruitment of a resident worker should be a careful consideration of a Big Local partnership, as any potential benefits around passion and community knowledge may be impacted by broader challenges that affect the worker’s ability to deliver their role well.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper demonstrates the important role that Big Local workers can play in supporting resident-led decision-making on the Big Local programme. Most workers roles involve a combination of tasks which enable them to take on aspects of day-to-day project management, delivery, administration, and relationship building with stakeholders and the community that allow Big Local partnerships to focus on strategic decision-making and prioritising local need. In this way, the Big Local worker is a useful extension of the role of the Locally Trusted Organisation – taking on process-level burdens that may be a barrier to the engagement of volunteer residents in the community and providing additional capacity for project delivery.

By adopting an enabler role, Big Local workers take on a position of encouragement and guidance for Big Local partnership members, including supporting them to empower others and engage positively with the local community. When it works well, they provide the space and capacity for local residents to build their confidence and skills around both decision-making and delivery at a hyperlocal level. This can provide demonstrable proof to local stakeholders, including the charity sector, local government and even other residents, of the value of community power.

However, it is important that Big Local workers not only have the skills to effectively deliver their job role, but they hold similar values to the Big Local programme and the expectation that they will support and advocate for resident-led decision-making. Where this is not the case, workers can take on more and more responsibility in a way that leaves Big Local partnerships with reduced decision-making power and can erode confidence, leaving the community feeling it is “done to” rather than a community “that believes it can,” (Wilson et al, 2022b: p.10).

Most Big Local partnerships have recognised the limits to their own capacity and have chosen to use their grant to employ paid staff to support their delivery of the Big Local programme. From this, it can be said that the Big Local programme has contributed to a new generation of the community development workforce by providing an opportunity for many to gain skills and experience in this field. This is particularly the case for the 27% who were in their first community development role, as captured in Local Trust's survey of Big Local workers in 2018 (Local Trust: 2019). Recognising the findings in the fieldwork of how previous community development experience meant that Big Local workers were more likely to support and encourage resident-led decision-making and community power, this new generation of community development workers could be a powerful legacy of the Big Local programme in the future.

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Appendix – Methodology for 2021 /22 fieldwork

Alongside the existing data on the topic of Big Local workers captured by Local Trust in 2018 and 2021, Local Trust commissioned [WSA Community Consultants](#) to deliver qualitative fieldwork for research between October 2021 and March 2022. It included:

- Scoping interviews with key internal and external stakeholders to begin to identify how workers contribute to the Big Local programme.
- Five Big Local areas selected as case studies. Multiple individuals within each area were interviewed to understand more on the role of Big Local workers in their specific community context.
- Five workshops targeted at key groups including partnership members, workers, LTOs and Big Local reps to make sense of and develop findings.
- A final internal workshop for Local Trust staff to sense check and discuss the data emerging from the fieldwork.

WSA Community Consultants also provided initial analysis of their findings and pulled out key quotes from the fieldwork in a final brief report for Local Trust, delivered in March 2022. This paper draws and expands on this report to further answer the research questions detailed above. Please note some of the quotes used in this piece have been edited for clarity and to maintain confidentiality.

The below section provides additional information on the methodology used in the qualitative fieldwork for this piece, and is taken directly from the final brief report that WSA Community Consultants provided to Local Trust:

Scoping Interviews

First, scoping interviews were undertaken with a range of people with experience or overview of Big Local workers. This included Local Trust staff with overview of area support, including some who had previously been workers in areas; a Big Local rep and a representative from an LTO working across several areas supporting and managing Big Local workers. This gave some clarity on what would be important to ask in the research case studies and also included wider perspectives to help frame the research.

Big Local area case studies

The five case study areas were selected using a range of sampling criteria in order to ensure breadth of experience and diverse areas. This included:

- Geographical location
- Number of workers
- Mix of resident and non-resident workers
- Different workers roles in areas
- Data gathered on level of influence and relationship with workers in individual areas

After the five areas were selected, researchers had initial conversations with area reps to better understand the area's context and to seek recommendations for interviewees. Introductions were made by reps to partnership chairs to seek permissions for research to take place.

All interviewees were provided with a consent form that provided an overview of the focus areas for the research ahead of time. An average of five case study interviews per area were conducted with a range of people from each area. These varied by area but usually included:

- Workers (sometimes multiple where an area has multiple workers)
- Partnership members (always including chair)
- LTO staff (in some cases where relevant)
- Rep (in some cases where relevant)

Workshops

We also held five workshops to receive feedback and insight on the preliminary findings from the case studies, organised by relationship to Big Local workers. Attendees for these workshops were sourced via open recruitment through Local Trust's usual promotional channels:

Workshop Audience	Number of Attendees
Partnership Members	7
Workers (1 of 2)	13
Workers (2 of 2)	14
LTOs	10
Reps	9

We were happy to have high attendance, positive reception and enthusiastic engagement across the workshops, with participants reporting that the workshops were a useful opportunity to discuss shared experiences and facilitate peer learning.

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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