

28 June 2023

Big Local and civic participation

About this report

Local Trust had increasingly been hearing that Big Local partnership members have gone on to other civic roles in their community. We were interested in their journeys and how important being involved in the programme had been in encouraging them and providing the skills to take on other roles.

By civic roles we mean a range of different roles in the community such as becoming a local councillor, volunteering or becoming a trustee of a voluntary or community group, becoming a school governor, joining a residents' association, or setting up a new voluntary or community group or charitable organisation. We asked partnership members who have taken on these roles about their experiences in a series of interviews. Here's what we found out.

Starting small

Taking on community roles is a life journey that tends to start small and builds to roles with greater responsibility. Big Local funding was purposefully allocated to areas that lacked civic infrastructure - community organisations or spaces - and has given many people an opportunity to start their civic participation journey. Our 2022 partnership members survey (Local Trust surveyed 757 people most of who were partnership members and some of who held other related roles such as Big Local worker) showed that around a quarter (27 percent) of people who get involved in the Big Local programme have never done any community work or volunteering before.

For Sebastian Salek, his involvement with the Big Local programme has led to a career change from journalism:

“I wanted to get involved with [the] community. I saw the street art and found out it came out of the Big Local [area]. I joined for one project but I ended up being chair... It was one of the hardest things I have ever done but also the most rewarding...”

Jackson Fraser-Hague grew up in Chatham in Kent. He returned after four years away and noticed the challenges facing his area:

“[I wanted] to find out how it had got that way. I found the leader of the opposition who told me about the Big Local which was based on my road. It was defeatist to complain but not get involved.”

Peter Scollard began his journey with community work because he wanted to improve his local area:

“I started to notice where I lived more. It was a very run down area. Graffiti, fly-tipping, anti-social behaviour, dog foul everywhere, weeds everywhere... We had three cars stolen... I wanted to improve my area.”

Peter’s first step to becoming a community leader was joining his Big Local partnership:

“I found out about a meeting for residents. I expected it to be the local council. I went down to voice my opinions about my community... When I got there, I did voice my opinions and shouted a lot. Then a lady turned around and said: ‘We are actually Big Local.’ and explained about it... From there I was part of the Big Local programme.”

Developing skills and confidence

For those who have engaged in their local community before, working with their Big Local partnership encourages them to develop their skills further. Sarah Rook explains that her experience in her local partnership led her to a more collaborative way of working:

“[After I joined the partnership] I learned a lot of meeting skills, a lot of people skills, how to listen to people. Not necessarily agreeing but you don’t have to shout them down, because I was a bit like that at the start.”

Both Sarah Rook and Peter Scollard became local councillors after being involved in their respective Big Local partnerships. Peter recalls:

“I was headhunted by the local council. They knew about the different community things I had done through the Big Local programme. They said ‘You are doing all these things and you are always coming to us. Why don’t you become a councillor?’”

Peter describes how he was not a typical councillor:

“For the first couple of years it is intimidating. Things like acronyms. I hadn’t the foggiest what they were on about. I’d never worked with writing and reading. It turned out after I went to the doctors I had quite severe dyslexia. I would send an email with no full stops.

“I started going to the officers and talking to the officers directly. I made fantastic connections... Instead of emails I think it is better to talk to the person. I was a councillor for eight years. And then became mayor.”

Founding community groups

We know from our partnership survey that nearly a quarter of partnership members go on to set up their own voluntary or community group or charitable organisation, indicating that the Big Local programme has generated significant civic capacity in the areas in which it operates.

Imrana Niazi was chair of her Big Local area and led a highly successful programme of work with the local police to prevent youth violence. However, after the sergeant the area was collaborating with moved on, the impetus behind this work declined. Imrana therefore decided to take on the work herself and founded a community interest company to do so. She recalls:

“I had built a really good relationship with the residents to create better awareness and encourage reporting...I wanted children to play whilst learning and not through pure listening... I applied for external funding and was awarded £10k. This allowed me to deliver my first workshop in various primary schools...

“Being chair of the Big Local partnership and being involved in the programme, helped me massively in developing the CIC. Without it, I wouldn’t have been able to identify my own strengths and achieve what I have.”

After working with the Big Local programme, Peter Scollard also set up a community interest company called No Walls Gardens, teaching gardening skills to volunteers including ex-offenders, long-term unemployed and recovering addicts across all age ranges.

Moving from informal to formal roles

Around 58 per cent of respondents to our 2022 partnership members survey said that they had gone on from the Big Local programme to other roles in their community. People sometimes move from informal to formal roles like parish or town councils and higher tiers of local government. We know that around five per cent of partnership members go on to become local councillors.

Lee Brownson, from Henknowle, became a town councillor for Bishop Auckland and later mayor of the town after his involvement as a chair of Gaunless Gateway Big Local:

“I was not interested in politics growing up. As a town councillor people want someone who they know is a doer and an activist who will get things done for them... I wasn't there to become the next MP. I was there to give a voice to Henknowle.”

When he was approached to stand as a councillor, Peter Scollard replied:

“‘I am a lad from the market. I am not into politics.’ They said ‘You would be a fantastic candidate, you are of the people. You support the people and deal with their issues.’”

Sarah Rook went from being chair of DY10 Big Local to a councillor and Mayor of Kidderminster Town Council. Reflecting on her journey, she said:

“I am not politically minded, but I am community minded. A good councillor is someone who listens and doesn't tell you what you need. That is something I loved about Big Local. We did a lot of consultation... You are talking to so many different people. And you have to find something in common. It is the same when you are a councillor.”

Once partnership members were elected to local government, they found that the network they built up through the Big Local programme helped them in their work. Sebastian Salek, chair of St. James Street Big Local, stood successfully as a councillor in Waltham Forest. He said:

“Big Local helped to build up my network. There are a lot of groups who we now fund as a council who I met through Big Local...So it is symbiotic – meeting people who can help and who we can help. It really strengthens that network. Rather than having to set it all up from scratch.”

We also know that the Big Local programme has in some cases helped residents participate in statutory forms of community governance like neighbourhood forums which develop neighbourhood plans.

In Arches Big Local in Chatham, Jackson Fraser-Hague helped to set up Arches Chatham Neighbourhood Forum. Setting up the forum was a complex process, enabled by the capacity built by the Big Local programme:

“For me the Big Local has underpinned everything the forum has done. Without that it would never have got here. Staffing capacity, consultant fees, venue spaces, insurances. When I speak to other areas in Medway who approach us and say they are interested in making a neighbourhood plan. [I warn them that] You need a permanent anchor. Because it is all very daunting, unless you have that permanent support base.”

Authenticity and enthusiasm

The genuine connection with their communities that partnership members have gives them a real enthusiasm for engaging and representing people when they take on formal council roles. Lee Brownson explains that as mayor of Bishop Auckland, he:

“Attended all the events I was invited to. I went to the water park, went to the kids’ football, opened charity shops. By the end of the year I had attended around 300 events. I had done two or three events a day at some points. I had raised more money than any other mayor. I did that because I was well known in the community.”

Peter Scollard also shared his experience of being mayor:

“I get told off because mayors normally attend things and go in and out. But I will stay for the whole thing. It makes it more personal. It is something I learned through working with the Big Local programme.”

Sarah Rook explained how she saw her civic journey as leading to her becoming a councillor and a mayor. She always takes into account the views and opinions of local people and tries to explain council business in an accessible way.

“If someone tells me something that is not true I don’t go ‘That is not true.’ I say ‘Ok I hear that. Let’s think about it this way’. And try to get them to think about it differently. It is just people skills really. I am not the sort of person who goes in and says no.”

These are just some of the stories of people who have gone from being part of the Big Local programme to other roles in their community. There are many more, and as the programme pursues its goals of building and regenerating communities, this legacy will continue and develop.

Eight people were interviewed for this research between October 2022 and April 2023. The Partnership member survey was conducted between June and September 2022.

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.

Local Trust

Canopi | 7-14 Great Dover Street | London SE1 4YR
Registered in England and Wales Charity number 1147511
Company number 07833396

DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.29832224

