
Powerful communities: Creating new decision- making spaces

A version of this paper was published internally by Local Trust in the summer of 2018 for the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) research conference. As a result, some references to the contemporary context may have changed since the period of writing. This version has been lightly edited to make it accessible for a general audience, with core terms and concepts and explained wherever possible.

Introduction

The Big Local programme provides funding and support to 150 areas across England. Each small area, typically neighbourhoods of 1,500 to 4,500 homes, has £1.15m to spend over a 10 to 15-year period. Importantly, this pot of money is ringfenced for that area, the area itself decides how this money is spent, and there are few restrictions on what the money can be used for locally. The decision-making spaces that are created because of Big Local allow for residents to have control over funding and decisions that matter to them. It also allows residents to develop relationships with other agencies, including councils.

The purpose of this paper is to identify how the Big Local programme creates decision-making spaces in the areas that it funds, the extent to which these spaces give communities more ability to influence and involve agencies and organisations, and how the funding model compares to some other government initiatives or programmes.

Structure of the paper

This paper will begin with an overview of literature on decision-making spaces and how they can be created in communities. It will then explore the Big Local programme and how the model creates decision-making spaces for residents in the community. It then goes on to identify how the model supports areas to work more closely with other local agencies and organisations.

Methodology

This paper is based on a review of existing research into the Big Local programme, focusing specifically on findings and data that address the research questions below. This includes reports and literature from two major longitudinal evaluations: the external *Communities in Control study*; and the multimedia evaluation, *Our Bigger Story*, by the Third Sector Research Centre at the University of Birmingham.

It also includes an in-depth report on the early years of Big Local by NCVO; and research into the relationship between councils and Big Local areas by New Local Government Network and the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU). We also reviewed internal programme data and survey data, including a biennial survey of 1,000 Big Local partnership members across England. We also conducted a review of government initiatives to look more widely at the extent to which communities have been meaningfully involved in decision-making processes in England. Literature on spaces was also consulted to provide a framework for the paper.

Research questions

- How does the Big Local model create decision-making spaces for the communities that it funds?
- How do Big Local decision-making spaces meaningfully influence and involve local agencies and organisations?
- How does this model fit within the wider context of community decision-making and place-based funding?

Decision-making spaces: An overview

To begin with, it is important to consider what decision-making spaces are, how they can be created and the different types that exist. Spaces, according to Gaventa, are “seen as opportunities, moments and channels where citizens can act to potentially affect policies, discourses, decisions and relationships that affect their lives and interests.” Gaventa’s definition of space is particularly focused on how people can be given power to influence decisions, taking “citizen actions and participation as its starting point” (2006, p.26).

Gaventa then breaks down this definition of space into three categories: closed spaces; invited spaces; and claimed/created spaces. Closed spaces are exclusive, where there are no plans to make them inclusive. Invited spaces are new spaces that are created by widening participation of closed spaces to make them more inclusive. Claimed or created spaces are created by less powerful actors and can take the form of community associations, social movements or simply places to debate, discuss and resist (Gaventa, 2006).

Created spaces, as outlined by Gaventa, allow people to have more control and power over decisions that affect their lives. Baker and Tayler (2018, p.4) argue that communities cannot become more powerful simply through being encouraged to “come together, organise and improve the quality of their lives”. For communities to have real power, the power relationships between communities and powerful institutions must be altered and one way to do this is ensuring that communities have decision-making spaces.

For the purposes of this paper, decision-making spaces are defined as opportunities for communities and people to make decisions that matter to them.

Big Local: A resident-led place-based funding model

Big Local is a long-term programme that provides funding and support to 150 communities across England over a 10–15-year period. The areas were selected by the Big Lottery Fund because, although experiencing relatively high levels of deprivation, they had not received their fair share of Lottery and other funding. This could be because they lacked capacity in the community or in local organisations to apply for funding.

Big Local areas form partnerships: a group of at least eight people, the majority of whom must be residents. The partnership consults with the wider community, agrees a shared vision, writes a plan to achieve that vision, oversees plan delivery, collects evidence to show how the plan is progressing and reviews the plan (Local Trust, 2017). While the plan is written by the partnership, plans are based on consultations with the community.

Areas are expected to set their own priorities and output targets. The desired outcomes of the overall programme are therefore broad-that:

- Communities will be better able to identify local needs and take action in response to them.
- People will have increased skills and confidence, so that they continue to identify and respond to needs in the future.
- The community will make a difference to the needs it prioritises.
- People will feel that their area is an even better place to live.

The activities that communities choose to fund vary based on the priorities they set and range from community engagement to the local economy, to wellbeing. Perhaps reflecting the fact that areas were chosen because of a lack of capacity in the community, 134 out of 150 areas spend money on community engagement, according to their most recent plans in August 2017.¹ However, most areas face persistent challenges sustaining high levels of engagement, especially when trying to get more people to participate in formal decision making within partnerships.

There are various support mechanisms within the programme. All areas work with a Locally Trusted Organisation (LTO) and a Big Local rep. LTOs receive and administer funding on behalf of Big Local partnerships and report on the use of funding to Local Trust and the partnership. The Big Local rep provides guidance at a local level, signposts and supports areas to write and review their plans. Areas can also attend national and regional learning and networking events which provide peer and specialist learning, while Local Trust's partner organisations offer specialist support on particular subjects.

Big Local: Creating decision-making spaces in communities

This section will explore how the Big Local model creates decision-making spaces in areas and how this works in practice. As outlined in the beginning of this paper, decision-making control over resources is given to areas through the Big Local model. These spaces are created as a result of the money given to communities and the autonomous decision-making control that it comes with. The spaces are also sustained by the support areas receive to develop their capacity to better identify need in the area and make decisions on how to respond to it.

Big Local gives residents more ownership of decision-making and autonomy to decide how to spend the money. The £1.15m that areas receive is ringfenced for the community, meaning that the partnership is not competing for the funding and will not lose it. This level of autonomous decision-making is coupled with minimal rules and regulations imposed on the areas. Areas can therefore "genuinely make decisions, as opposed to only superficially influencing them" (Curtis et al, 2016, p.35). Having this level of decision-making for

¹ Unpublished data on priority spending for Big Local areas.

communities has positive impacts on health, well-being, and social connectedness (Locality, 2018).

Alongside giving areas control of funding, Local Trust provides support to areas to help develop local capacity for resident-led decision-making. The model includes built-in support for resident-led decision-making “with as much flexibility as possible and as responsive to areas’ needs as possible” (Curtis et al, 2016, p.20) and research suggests that the partnerships involved in the Big Local programme value the tailored support provided (McCabe et al, 2017). All areas have a rep who provides a few days of support each month. In addition, Local Trust offers areas specific and thematic support through events and partner organisations. Given the long-term, complex nature of the programme, it has been difficult to predict what kind of support areas will need, and this evolves over time and depends on the stage of delivery. As a result, the support put in place does not always match up immediately to the needs of an area. For example, Big Local reps, who work closely with areas at the local level, have reported that they have given more than their allocated time to areas (Curtis et al, 2016).

The long-term timeframe of the Big Local programme also supports capacity and skills development. As mentioned above, many of the communities selected as Big Local areas were selected because they were low-capacity areas. This timeframe allows areas to “test things out”, grow in confidence and learn and develop at their own pace (McCabe et al, 2017, p.27). In a survey of partnership members, 84 per cent agreed that the Big Local programme has given them the freedom to do things to a timescale that works for them and 70 per cent agreed that they are satisfied with the pace of their progress with Big Local. As one partnership member stated: “the 10-year funding gives time to achieve something lasting” (Yung, 2017).

Formalising the decision-making process

Alongside the minimal rules and regulations, areas choose how to form the partnership and the format of the meetings. In general, decision-making spaces benefit from a lack of formality to promote “participation, inclusion and innovation” (Gilchrist, 2016, p.15). However, these informal ways of working can sometimes be seen as less legitimate and unrepresentative of the entire population. As Gilchrist (2016, p.20) notes, informal ways of working need “more inclusive forms of involvement”.

Informal ways of working are perceived as critical to getting residents involved. However, in practice, many partnerships have not retained these informal ways of working. Instead, they have adopted formal ways of working, such as formal meetings with minutes, chairs and vice chairs, and subcommittees, and “local government type models – with executive and working groups” (McCabe et al, 2017, p.53).

Although further research needs to be conducted to understand these formal ways of working and why they have been adopted, previous research projects have highlighted some issues. Firstly, those who have a long history of attending meetings and have experience working in these formal ways and often opt to continue this when setting up Big Local partnerships. This, however, has the potential to drive out newcomers who may want to get involved but do not have similar experience. McCabe et al (2017) suggest that some of the formal approaches to Big Local meetings and procedures may be daunting for newcomers. In the early years of the Big Local programme, there was:

"A clear divide between the ‘traditional meeting attenders’ (usual suspects who are very good at talking) and ‘new blood’ who are

very keen to do and make things happen but require a more informal approach than meetings.” (Big Local rep, quoted in James et al, 2015, p. 56)

Partnerships also choose to create more formal decision-making spaces as a way to be more legitimate and accountable to the community. James et al (2015) suggest that local agencies working with partnerships welcome these formal structures, which can help to build more effective external relationships.

Local Trust’s 2016 survey of its partnership members suggests that around 30 per cent of them have not previously been involved in similar activity, which suggests that programmes of this sort do have the potential to go beyond the so-called usual suspects and include newcomers even where partnerships choose to organise themselves traditionally.

The extension of decision-making to the wider community

While the partnership is a decision-making space, it also conducts frequent community consultations to ensure that what it is doing reflects the desires of the community. This is a way to legitimise the partnership’s decision-making and extend the decision-making space to the wider community. Partnership members are conscious of their responsibility and accountability to community members in managing the Big Local funds (James et al, 2015). The process of consulting and providing feedback on progress is seen as vital in letting “residents know what is being done and demonstrating that their views and feedback is being acted upon” (Curtis et al, 2016, p.48). Big Local areas use a number of methods to demonstrate this feedback, publishing newsletters, reports and meeting minutes to remain transparent and accountable for the decisions they are making.

However, Big Local partnerships often report the challenge of reaching beyond the “loudest voices” and “engaging the wider community in the working of Big Local” (McCabe et al, 2017, p.4). In response to a 2016 survey, partnership members detailed the difficulties in getting residents to be interested in Big Local (Local Trust, 2018). To some extent, this reflects wider trends which show that a relatively small subset of the UK population contributes a high level of volunteering hours, donation, and civic participation (NCVO, 2012). But there are also more specific challenges in bringing in the community to the decision-making space. Partnership members may not know how to bring in new or transient communities in their area. In some rural areas, new housing development has “resulted in incomers who tend to be out-commuters. Partnerships are aware of these changes, though often unsure of how best to respond to them” (McCabe et al, 2017, p.10). Finally, engagement activity can be time-intensive for the volunteers on partnerships; and may be more effective when there is a paid worker who can fulfil this work (McCabe et al, 2017).

However, Big Local areas are widening decision-making spaces to the community in a number of ways. Research has found they are “creating structures or groups where those beyond the partnership can contribute to decision-making...including participatory budgeting, partnership subgroups/open meetings/open forums, open space and citizens’ juries” (NCVO, 2016, p.22). One-day events and festivals are also used to promote community engagement. In one area, gardening and ‘bake and taste’ groups are a source of ongoing consultation (McCabe et al, 2017). These spaces help spread awareness of the Big Local programme, get people involved in different activities, conduct consultations with the community and share with people what has been achieved. What seems to be particularly effective is creativity and visibility, rather than “operating behind closed doors and expecting the community to come to them” (McCabe et al, 2017, p.11).

Big Local and invited decision-making spaces

While this discussion has focused so far on claimed spaces that are created or used by Big Local areas, areas also participate in invited spaces with other agencies, including councils, NHS, police, and other local organisations (Local Trust, 2018). This is an important way to bring communities and other agencies to work on issues together. Particularly in an era of austerity, councils need to work more closely with communities “so that they can work together to take difficult decisions and think innovatively about how to continue creating the types of places people want to live in” (Glover, 2017, p.4).

In practice, relationships between Big Local areas and external bodies vary. There are Big Local partnerships with close partnership arrangements with their local authority, but there are also some who find this relationship challenging and that these decision-making spaces are in effect ‘closed’. Areas which find it challenging to work with councils have either limited contact or relationships which are “fraught with difficulty” (McCabe et al, 2017, p.4).

In some cases, physical distance makes the council effectively a closed space; especially in cases of large, remote unitary councils (Local Trust, 2017). In others, the council’s approach to Big Local at the beginning of the programme has created a lasting lack of trust. Autonomy and resident control over funds are fundamental to the programme, but at early stages some councils wrongly perceived that Big Local was a local authority project, a project for them to control, or held an “attitude that Big Local is a hole in the wall” (Tjoa, 2018, p.8). Big Locals also encounter ‘bureaucracy’ and delays within the local authority, including “waiting for planning permission, asset transfers or for the go-ahead to proceed with development work” (Local Trust, 2018, p.5).

But often the Big Local model provides greater opportunities for meaningful participation in invited decision-making spaces. Having money and being present over the long-term gives the partnership leverage, credibility, and the role of a ‘serious player’ in an area. Some Big Local areas which have funded parks and play areas have negotiated long-term maintenance agreements with the local authority. And the formal approach to partnerships and decision-making structures are often welcomed by other agencies, such as the local authority and housing associations (McCabe et al, 2017).

Alongside the funding, Big Local’s role in gathering information about their areas’ needs also gives them influence in local decision-making. For example, in one area the Big Local’s community profile and plan is now incorporated into the council’s development plan, and in another, the council used evidence produced by the Big Local area to negotiate with private housing developers (McCabe et al, 2017).

In some cases, a productive relationship comes with time. For example, some councillors and officers from the local council have come in with strong ideas about how Big Local projects should work, but “in time they came round to the idea that the power dynamic should be inverted, with residents leading the way” (Glover, 2017, p.7).

Community decision-making beyond Big Local

While this paper has mainly focused on the Big Local model, it is important to consider other initiatives that have attempted to give communities more power over decision-making. This section will explore some of these initiatives and the extent to which communities were given decision-making control.

In the period after the EU referendum, there has been continued discussion about how communities can be meaningfully involved in decision-making (Locality, 2018). Evidence suggests that many people increasingly feel they are not listened to and that they are not involved in decision-making. In early 2018, a survey run by YouGov found that 71% of people feel “they have not much or no control over the important decisions that affect their neighbourhood and local community” (Locality, 2018, p.2).

This comes after a succession of government programmes and initiatives that referenced ‘empowerment’ or a transfer of power to communities, but often did not actually result in communities with more power over decision-making. Researchers have critiqued government initiatives of the 1990s but also found that some of the subsequent New Labour programmes did not resolve these issues. Marilyn Taylor (2007, p.297) concluded that while the various New Labour empowerment initiatives had created new spaces for engagement, this did not result in a genuine shift of power to communities:

“The shift from government to governance in recent years has created significant new opportunities for people from disadvantaged communities to participate in the decisions that affect them. However, the weight of evidence over the years suggests that these communities have remained on the margins in partnerships and other initiatives.”

As McCabe (2017, p.86) note: “Big Local is in stark contrast with previous neighbourhood change and regeneration programmes in that areas are not driven by top-down targets, annual spend and externally imposed goals and outcomes (see for example New Deal for Communities... and the Single Regeneration Budget)”.

More recently, the Localism Act (2011) was heralded by an ambition to “end the era of top-down government [through a] fundamental shift of power from Westminster to people” (Locality, 2018, p.12). However, “A longstanding concern with localism is that it can actually entrench inequalities, strengthening the position of those with the resources, time and networks, whilst excluding the most marginalised communities.” (Locality, 2018, p.12)

Finally, the devolution agenda, which began in November 2014, “represents a massive opportunity to reshape our economy and public services” (Locality, 2018, p.12). But again, this might be a failed exercise:

“Reducing the debate on localism to the question of ‘what powers are devolved?’, while a key part, misses the fundamental point about localism: people are the end goal, not local government. Devolution as it currently stands does not secure a fundamental shift in power to people.” (Locality, 2018, p.12)

These initiatives highlight how communities have previously had limited decision-making power and how there wasn't a legitimate transfer of power. Crucially, the Big Local model transfers the power from the funder to the communities that it funds. The Big Local programme gives communities autonomous decision-making control over resources. However, it is important to note that the model is not a replacement for short-term interventions in communities to alleviate need.

The Big Local model operates at the hyper-local level and often comes with the challenge of working with local agencies. It is important to note that none of the agencies which Big Local areas work with operate solely at this hyper-local level. Big Local areas are small, typically neighbourhoods of 1,500 – 4,500 homes (Local Trust, 2017) which can mean that areas continue to feel isolated from decision-making (McCabe et al, 2017).

The Big Local model also requires a significant amount of resources, not just to award the £1.15m to each area, but also to provide the support that is required to build skills and capacity in those areas. Over the 15 years of the programme, Local Trust will be investing some £65m in providing that support – approaching 30 per cent of the value of funds directly disbursed. Without accepting this as a necessary (and ongoing) investment requirement, it is likely to be far more challenging to develop any meaningful level of community-led decision-making.

Conclusion

The type of funding and support that is provided to communities through the Big Local programme is integral to creating decision-making spaces for people to have a say on things that matter to them. The Big Local programme is an important example of a funding model which creates these decision-making spaces. The ring-fenced funding means that communities are not competing for the funding and also cannot lose it. The support that the areas receive is aimed at capacity building and supporting them to be better able to identify need and make appropriate decisions to respond to it.

Challenges include involving and engaging new people, often because of the tendency towards a formal approach to making decisions. Additionally, influencing key decision-makers involves overcoming barriers like physical distance, size differences, and cultural and relational factors. Yet because in part of the funding and long-term nature of the programme, Big Local shows that community groups can develop important partnerships with invited decision-making spaces.

Big Local is distinct from government initiatives which have seemingly promoted community decision making yet have not resulted in a genuine transfer of power to people from disadvantaged communities. The programme demonstrates the potential to achieve this transfer of power with sufficient time, funds, and support to build capacity for decision-making. It remains to be seen whether and how this can be scaled up from the hyper-local level.

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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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Registered in England and Wales Charity number 1147511
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