



Equality, diversity, and inclusion

How EDI is understood, defined and
practiced across Big Local areas

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Local Trust

About this report

This is an independent research report commissioned by Local Trust and delivered by brap, to investigate how people involved with the national Big Local programme understand, define, and practice equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). The observations and findings will aid the development of EDI based support, guidance and resources available to Big Local areas. The report was prepared by Asif Afridi, Siobhan Sadlier, Ghiyas Somra and Joy Warmington of brap.

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Introduction

This research report is an independent deep dive, undertaken by brap, to investigate how people involved with the Big Local programme understand, define, and practice equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in their work. The findings will assist Local Trust's management of EDI within the programme and the development of EDI based support, guidance, and resources for Big Local areas.

Since the origins of the Big Local programme, there have been questions about whether those involved were sufficiently reflective of the community.¹ While partnerships are conscious of the need to reflect their local area, more recent evidence suggests some still face challenges.²

Overall, the ethnicity of partnership members is broadly in line with the local population in many places. However, some Big Local areas have a higher proportion of people who are white than the local population (in some areas, there are five times more white people on the partnership than there are in the local population). Similarly, the age profile of partnerships is lower than the average of charity trustees in England and Wales (61) and over time new, younger partnership members are being recruited. But some 84% of more experienced partnership members are aged 45 or over. In addition, there are five times more partnership

members over the age of 65 compared to the local population in some places.

Over time Local Trust has gathered learning about the inclusion of different communities in Big Local activities. For example, research commissioned in 2019 to understand how Big Local areas engage with 'new' or transient groups found that Big Local areas have faced barriers engaging with these groups with stereotypes held about the 'hard to reach' nature of transient communities.³

Another 2019 study found that developing a shared vision to respond to inequality in Big Local areas where the physical boundaries of the Big Local may cut across or combine pre-existing communities of shared interest can be a challenging process.⁴

More recently, a project led by the University of Kent explores resident-led decision-making processes in Big Local partnerships. It also examines how power

¹ NCVO (2014) *Big Local: The Early Years*, London: NCVO

² Local Trust (2019) *Do Big Local Partnerships reflect the community?* London: Local Trust

³ Fancourt, G., Usher, R., Garforth, H. and Taylor, M. (2019) *Rethinking home: engaging transient*

and new communities in Big Local, London: Local Trust

⁴ Dallimore, D., Davis, H., Eichsteller, M. and Mann, R. (2019) *Pushing the boundaries of Big Local*, Bangor: Bangor University

operates in communities and ways in which traditional structures of decision-making and the action of established local organisations may disempower residents. While research of this type is offering an insight into some aspects of Big Local partnerships' response to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), there are opportunities to deepen understanding of how Big Local areas are specifically approaching their thinking and practice on EDI.

In June 2020, Local Trust set out several EDI guiding principles for Big Local areas that it expects them to follow (in addition to following statutory obligations under the Equality Act 2010).

Local Trust has initiated a learning cluster on EDI for Big Local areas and will be seeking to ensure this can respond to issues relevant to those areas. Similarly, in 2020 several Big Local areas held conversations about the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement on their work and their communities.

As Big Local areas plan their response to recovery and re-building from the COVID-19 pandemic, Local Trust saw opportunities to conduct a review to establish how a range of those areas are experiencing EDI, to understand the appetite for further action on this topic, as well as support and development needs. As a result, in September 2020, the charity, brap, was commissioned to undertake a short review of a sample of Big Local areas' approaches to EDI to explore this further.

Aims of the work

Local Trust contracted brap to undertake the review for two primary purposes.

- To share learning about how a group of different Big Local areas are thinking about and practising EDI in their work.
- To inform Local Trust's future activities to support Big Local areas to progress EDI.

The review was not intended as an evaluation and recognised that there are strengths in each Big Local partnership's response to EDI, from which other Big Local areas can learn. Instead, the review aimed to draw out key learning and themes that might support Big Local areas' and Local Trust's efforts in collectively making a more significant impact on EDI issues in the future. Local Trust aimed the review mainly at exploring perceptions of EDI within partnerships and the involvement of residents in decision-making and Big Local activities. In particular, the review had the following research objectives:

- To explore people who work on Big Local's **aptitude** in progressing EDI (with 'aptitude' understood broadly as skill, knowledge and capacity)
- To explore people who work on Big Local's **attitude** to progressing EDI (beliefs that drive action on EDI, views about the importance of EDI and accountability for progress)
- To explore people who work on Big Local's **appetite** for progressing EDI (levels of interest/willingness to engage in the agenda)

About brap

brap is a charity transforming the way we think and do equality. It was 21 years old last year (2020) and established to be an independent, transformative force in the equalities sector. For more information, please go to: brap.org.uk.

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Approach

Research design

The research questions were:

- What types of **aptitude** do people who work on Big Local draw on to progress EDI?
- What **attitudes** do people who work on Big Local hold about EDI?
- What **appetite** is there for progressing EDI in Big Local areas?

brap examined these questions through an exploration of topics such as:

- What do the terms equality, diversity and inclusion mean to partnership members, and how do Big Local partnerships seek to address them?
- What mechanisms are there to help the partnership reflect the community's views?
- What are the primary equality, diversity and inclusion challenges experienced by Big Local areas? How does local context affect EDI challenges?
- What role/responsibility do people who work on Big Local feel they have in progressing EDI?

Methodology

Sample for fieldwork

Researchers identified and invited eight Big Local areas to participate in the project based on the following criteria:

- Varied geographical location across England
- Varied characteristics of areas using Local Trust's typology of Big Local areas (post-industrial heartlands, rural fringe, peripheral estates, inner-city diversity, and inner city-economically active)
- Varied levels of representativeness of partnership members compared to the local population in terms of gender, ethnicity and age (with three areas having higher levels of representation compared to the local population and five areas having comparatively lower levels)

We used these criteria to consider EDI issues in various local contexts. The representativeness of partnership members compared to the population was used as a simple (but recognisably insufficient) criteria. We used it to speak to some areas that faced challenges in recruiting partnership members from diverse backgrounds and others who have had some success.

The appendix includes an overview of the characteristics of the eight areas that kindly participated in this research.

Fieldwork

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing rules, we undertook all data collection online or by phone. We contacted Big Local reps and workers to explore opportunities for engaging Big Local partnership members and other local stakeholders, and they organised focus groups.

Six of the eight areas agreed to participate in a focus group, and two areas preferred to conduct individual interviews only.

Researchers for brap organised focus groups, attended mainly by partnership members and locally trusted organisations (LTO), other stakeholders such as local council or local voluntary organisations and reps. In addition, we did individual interviews with people with similar roles to explore particular issues relevant to the area more deeply. We undertook six focus groups (engaging 40 people in total) and 24 individual interviews.

Analysis

Data analysis was qualitative using a coding framework designed for the research project. We used this framework to identify main themes (organised by research objectives) in a thematic analysis.

A note on definitions

In this report, we use the terms equality, diversity and inclusion. These are contested terms and mean different things to different people.

For this report, we offer a brief and incomplete definition of them in the following way:

Equality: ensuring that people are not treated less favourably because of their protected characteristics and enjoy equal outcomes, choices, and opportunities.

Diversity: a recognition of each other's differences. A diverse environment describes a wide range of backgrounds and mindsets that support a culture of creativity and innovation.

Inclusion: creating an environment where everybody feels welcome and valued. We also use BME to refer to people who identify as Black or as part of a marginalised ethnicity, community or group. We recognise that this is a contested description, too, and not everyone will identify with it.

We also acknowledge that it may not accurately express the views of those who experience discrimination based on skin colour because it is a broad term.

However, we have used the term to draw comparisons between people from White British and BME backgrounds for our analysis.

What we found

We have organised the following findings regarding the three key research questions for this project. Each offers a different insight into current approaches to EDI in Big Local areas as well as opportunities for future learning, development and support

What types of skills and knowledge do people who work on Big Local draw on to progress EDI?

We asked participants to share their views about where their Big Local had responded successfully to inequality in the local area and places where they faced particular challenges.

In this section, we draw out some of the primary aptitudes (skill, knowledge, capacity, experience) that those involved in Big Local felt they were drawing upon currently when responding to EDI issues. We also outline where there appear to be opportunities for future learning and development.

Knowledge of the local area

Current approaches

Partnerships draw upon local knowledge and involve residents in shaping decisions and views about local needs. There is a strong focus on consultation and engagement with residents involving a wide range of methods (for example, community research, polling and surveys, community events, meetings with local stakeholders like the council and voluntary sector).

Resident and worker knowledge can help bridge the gap between what is on paper and what is happening in the area.

Opportunities for future learning and development

Some partnership members noted they were not sure if their engagement work marginalised groups in the local area. Some did not feel assured that they had sufficient information about different social groups' needs.

Many focus group participants said they thought they grasped local inequalities faced by those protected under the Equality Act 2010 – such as race inequalities or those faced by young people. However, they felt less able to share details. Big Local areas appear to rely heavily on the role of partnership members in sharing their local knowledge and interpreting local consultation data to understand inequalities faced by residents.

There are opportunities for partnerships to compare what they have heard and what they believe about local needs and the impact of the Big Local's work to other forms of data about local demographics and local inequalities in outcomes (for example, on employment, housing and health).

Engaging residents from diverse backgrounds

Current approaches

Big Local partnerships want to ensure that partnership meetings are inclusive and encourage people from various backgrounds to participate. So, they are avoiding jargon, supporting residents to participate, building confidence and seeking to maintain engagement in areas where there may be high levels of population flux.

Partnerships are using community development skills to empower residents to chair and run partnership meetings. They offer residents opportunities to 'shadow' partnership meetings to find out what they are like before participating. Some partnerships have recognised parts of the community are unlikely to be interested in or able to participate in formal partnership meetings and that they need to offer other ways to engage. Some have also established particular organisational/governance structures to help residents have a lead role in governance. They want to ensure the 'usual suspects' with power in the local community (often older men) do not dominate decision-making.

Opportunities for future learning and development

Some spoke about how Big Local partnership meetings and engagement activities have not been felt as inclusive by some residents in the past. Others described the partnership meetings as 'cliquey' or uncomfortable for those not used to that type of environment. Interviewees spoke about inequality based on gender, race and class in particular. Similarly, some partnership members recognised that they were mainly engaging the willing – those who have time, resource, skills, and confidence to participate. The participation of residents who are professionals or those with parish experience or knowledge of county councils or governing charities is perhaps

unsurprising given the knowledge and skills required to manage governance arrangements and deployment of funds.

Yet valuing those sets of skills and expertise also runs the risk of maintaining the involvement and power of people from professional and established community development backgrounds. There are opportunities to improve the inclusiveness of partnership meetings and decision-making processes.

Confidence in working with diverse views and perspectives

Current approaches

We asked partnerships about how equipped they feel to respond when people hold different views about topics related to EDI (such as the treatment of immigrants or the role of women in politics). For example, one partnership shared how they had drawn upon their partnership's code of conduct to question a local politician's admission onto the partnership and ensure that their actions would keep with its ethos.

Shared understanding and knowledge of the values of the partnership emerged as an essential component of responding effectively – as did support from their rep and Local Trust. A worker in another area (with a primarily White British population) described how the partnership had seen discussion about the wording of their annual Christmas card as an opportunity to discuss different views within the partnership about the inclusion of non-Christian communities in the festive period.

Opportunities for learning and development

People felt some partnerships marginalised particular views and

experiences and prioritised some opinions about the needs of communities over others without sufficient discussion. Some described feeling excluded based on gender, race and age. For example, one interviewee felt White British partnership members had not fully heard their efforts to raise awareness about the marginalisation of people from BME and non-Christian religious backgrounds. Another interviewee described how she had faced particular pressure seeking to drive change on challenging inequality issues locally in the face of hostility from local men in her community. "They threaten 'I'm going to see your Dad or Grandad; you're too empowered for this community. So who allowed you outside the kitchen sink?'" said the partnership member.

In some cases, the emotional labour and challenge of raising issues of inequality had led to people stepping away from the Big Local process. For example, one young person involved a Big Local area did so after raising concerns about the partnership's response to an incident involving a group of young people mainly from mixed heritage and Black backgrounds. He felt partnership members had been treated unfairly because of their racial background.

When we asked participants about evidence of how 'included' people from different backgrounds with different views feel within partnerships, this was described mainly in terms of levels of consultation undertaken, changes to governance arrangements or the recruitment of new partnership members from diverse backgrounds. There are opportunities to improve evaluation to understand the feelings and perceptions of different partnership members about inclusion.

Outreach and engagement of communities in Big Local activities

Current approaches

Partnerships offer activities that are open to everybody and encourage people from all backgrounds to attend. People see this as a strength in responding to EDI. For example, during the pandemic, some Big Local partnerships were much more proactive in their outreach. They did not expect the community to come to them and had noticed the impact this had in improving participants' reach and diversity. Some also described how they had needed to think beyond the traditional role of a Big Local partnership as a grant giver that waits for people to come to them for approval of funds. Instead, they aimed to think flexibly and support local people from diverse backgrounds to take the initiative and take forward ideas they thought were important.

Opportunities for learning and development

Some partnerships described barriers in reaching working-age adults (due to time restrictions associated with work) and people from particular ethnic backgrounds. Some participants described how BME groups could feel Big Local supported projects are not for their community and they saw responding to cohesion challenges associated with this. Some participants expressed a desire to build the capacity of their Big Local to engage with people from BME backgrounds in different languages to build trust and address language barriers.

Some partnerships also recognised that the views and beliefs of people on the partnership might be restricting the

breadth of ideas and range of people supported through Big Local activities (for example, the potential role of bias in making decisions about who to fund and work with).

Skills and knowledge of reps and workers

Finally, reps and workers talked about using their skills and knowledge to support discussion and learn about EDI topics within Big Local partnerships.

Current practice

Some had invited partnerships to reflect on why they had not decided to support particular projects and who they had included in discussions. Others discussed how they were keen for the partnership to consider EDI issues as part of their future planning process (and saw the focus group run as part of this project as an opportunity to initiate that discussion). A great deal of experience in community development or knowledge of the local area they were working in drove rep and worker responses to this agenda in many cases.

Opportunities for learning and development

There is significant diversity in how confident reps and workers felt discussing EDI issues with partnerships and the wider community. Some were highly knowledgeable and confident, and others thought they were pretty early in their learning journey on the topic. We noted a willingness to build skills and knowledge. However, there was little consensus between reps and workers about the types of learning and development support that might be most useful. Despite this, there are opportunities for greater peer learning/sharing of practice

between reps and workers from different Big Local partnerships in the future. First, interviewees talked about the scope of reps and workers' role and the limitations this can place on practice. There are opportunities to be clear about reps' and workers' role in promoting and supporting Big Local partnerships to progress EDI and the importance or relevance for the Big Local programme. Some described barriers associated with the 'light touch advisory role' and not wanting to damage trust and disrupt the resident-led nature of the work.

Second, some reps shared a concern about not knowing some local communities in their role. Third, one rep reflected on how they had not recognised until recently that they could have done more to invite people with traditionally marginalised views from BME backgrounds to share what they are thinking and support them.

This section has explored the skills and knowledge that people involved in running Big Local partnerships feel they are drawing upon to progress EDI. It also identified areas where there are opportunities for further learning and development to improve the impact on EDI in the future. In the following section, we explore how research participants feel about the topic of EDI and the attitudes they hold about their role in progressing EDI.

What attitudes do people who work on Big Local hold about EDI?

We explored the attitudes and beliefs about EDI held by focus group participants and interviewees. In particular, we explored what partnership members mean when they refer to equality, diversity and inclusion. In addition, we explored how partnership

members perceive the relevance of EDI issues to the effective running of Big Local. And we explored how partnership members view their accountability to the diverse communities they serve. The research findings provide helpful context that can support the practical design of future support activities for Big Local areas on EDI. We outline some key themes below.

What do equality, diversity, and inclusion mean?

Inclusion has been part of the ethos of the Big Local programme from the beginning. Most partnerships felt they were performing relatively well in responding to all of Local Trust's [guiding EDI principles](#). However, levels of familiarity with the programme's wording of these shared guiding principles were relatively low. We also noticed a diverse range of views about the meaning of equality, diversity, participation, and inclusion within partnerships and between them. Equality, diversity and inclusion were seen through a geographical lens in some partnerships (ensuring people from across the geographical area participate), with relatively little reference to protected characteristics in the Equality Act 2010 (such as gender, race and disability).

When participants referred to protected characteristics, it was principally in ensuring equal representation of people on the partnership, mainly based on age and race. An example includes undertaking outreach to attract new partnership members from BME or younger backgrounds. Others referred to protected characteristics to ensure people from diverse backgrounds attend Big Local event, such as advertising events across the community and developing activities for specific neighbourhoods. Fewer referred to inclusion (for example, the welcome people feel when engaging with Big Local) or valuing diversity (how valued or heard different views and perspectives are) and differentiating provision of activities and engagement methods to

reach groups who were traditionally excluded in the past.

Accountability for progress on EDI

We asked partnerships how they are held to account for progress on EDI. Many felt accountable to local people by developing appropriate governance procedures, involving residents in decisions about how the Big Local operates. They also undertake local consultation. "[We use] people's experiences, their reactions, to help us understand how we are getting on, and we adjust," said a partnership member. One partnership talked about how residents hold them to account via social media, too.

Yet, many had also noticed gaps in involvement from particular groups in partnership decisions. They expressly referred to gaps in younger people, those from BME backgrounds and residents who may not be familiar with formal meetings and procedures. Some felt that responsibility for progress on EDI-related issues could sit with one or two interested people on the partnership. They felt that responsibility for considering EDI rather than all partnership members taking responsibility for considering it in decision-making.

We noticed that when speaking about accountability on EDI, many participants referred to the involvement of people in partnership meetings and consultation processes as evidence of accountability. Getting information from a range of people affected by decisions is an essential component of accountability. Still, it does not automatically result in generating critical feedback and scrutiny and taking responsibility or action based on that feedback. Some interviewees were interested in developing more structured approaches to mapping performance on EDI and responding to feedback. Some felt that local residents are not holding people who work on Big Local to account explicitly for progress on EDI or measuring progress systematically.

Some felt that existing accountability mechanisms associated with the Big Local programme – such as the partnership review process and plan assessment process – are relatively light-touch on interrogating progress on EDI.

Self-reflection and bias

Several participants described how partnership members' attitudes about specific groups (for example, women and BME and younger people) could affect the choices they make. For example, participants talked about how people's previous life experiences may have meant that they had not had exposure to 'difference'. As a result, they may hold stereotypes about them:

"They feel possessive over the [name of space]; certain characters aren't welcome there as much. There are issues around race and immigration. Not a massive migrant community, but they often get pointed at as if they are creating a problem. That's the kind of attitude, but they are older people."
- worker

In some cases, this can limit the breadth of activities initiated by Big Local partnerships. For example, an interviewee (rep) said views among partnership members about who needs support during the pandemic are limited to disabled and older people who can't leave the house, rather than other communities like refugees who may face barriers asking for help. However, some also recognised that assumptions were being made about local people's characteristics and what makes them 'hard to engage'. There are opportunities to challenge and question stereotypes associated with this.

Doing anti-racism in predominantly White British areas

Several interviewees raised local context as an essential factor that determines how

residents respond to discussing racism. In some areas with a significant majority of White British people, they felt many residents wouldn't have faced racism directly and will find it harder to relate to and discuss in the context of the Big Local's work:

"They don't face abuse because of what they look like; it [discussing racism] has to be more nuanced."
- worker

Others talked about the impact of deprivation, education, and lack of contact with people from BME backgrounds in the past as necessary in shaping resident attitudes about discussing issues of racism:

"If you were to come knocking on the door with me and talk about White privilege where so many are growing up in poverty, then I wouldn't hear it."
- worker

Despite some of the nuances associated with how people may think about race and their relationship to it, most people we spoke to felt that majority White British communities would benefit from responding to racism issues in their community and beyond. An anti-racist approach is needed because some white people may not believe that learning about racism is relevant to them or they are affected by racism. Anti-racism refers to more than just responding to what happens to black people. It relates to how we are all racialised and can benefit from bringing attention to this in our lives. It refers to using our power to bring attention to the social construction of race and the systemic nature of racism, and its impact on our lives. For example, one partnership member interviewee said racial intolerance in their (predominantly White British) community could be seen as part of a broader challenge the community faces, linked to a feeling of disconnection from nearby towns and austerity. Another area talked about the threat of far-right activity and the need to think carefully about supporting a

community that has been primarily White British in the past but where demographics are changing. These views suggest that a nuanced approach to progressing anti-racism informed by local context is essential in some communities. Workers and reps, in particular, talked about using opportunities to promote learning. One example is not insisting that all partnerships post a statement of support for the Black Lives Matter movement. Instead, some workers and reps talked about the importance of using strategies (when appropriate) to 'call in' local residents into a conversation about issues of racism, and other topics like sexism and homophobia, if they arise. This contrasts with always 'calling out' instances of racism and shutting people down before they get a chance to reflect upon their views critically.

Scope and focus of activity on EDI

Finally, we encountered different attitudes about the scope and ambition of Big Local partnership's work on EDI. As mentioned above, when asked to define EDI and what it meant to their Big Local work, most partnership members referred to improving the representation of their partnership as a critical goal. Several talked about improving the reach and accessibility of their community engagement and projects/services they were providing. They also referred to addressing barriers to engagement for BME groups and working-age adults in particular. Some also described ambitions to improve cohesion and build awareness of local residents about issues of diversity and the different people who live in their area.

Fewer Big Local areas explicitly saw a role for their Big Local in responding to ingrained, systemic forms of inequality that affect their local area, such as inequalities in employment, education, domestic violence and abuse. For example, one area talked about their support of local parents in using the law to challenge decisions made by schools about their children's rights to education.

Another Big Local partnership had successfully developed and run projects focused on gang crime and child sexual exploitation, engaging a range of partner agencies like the police and schools. This challenging and ambitious work focused on building trusting relationships with others in the community and changing attitudes and behaviours perpetuated at a systemic level. As with any attempt to change systems of oppression, some involved in the Big Local's efforts faced 'pushback' from people within the partnership and the wider community. These attitudes can pose significant barriers for people who work on Big Local that have ambitious aims to address local inequalities. For example, some described an attitude that resident-led work is not trusted or supported by those involved in the local party political system. Others talked about how female and BME partnership members had not felt valued or heard despite their capacity and knowledge to bring about positive change for their community.

Some participants described what they felt is needed to challenge attitudes of this type and make a more significant impact on local inequalities in their area. In particular, some stressed the importance of working with partners who hold power in local systems to support their work on inequality. Others praised Local Trust's direct support for Big Local partnerships' decisions to run projects on challenging inequality issues despite 'pushback' from local agencies and politicians. However, some interviewees also felt there were opportunities for Local Trust to build trusting relationships with BME communities more and showcase the vital work of Big Local partnerships working on inequality issues outside London. This would help to build trust and greater sharing of knowledge. We also heard that an essential aspect of practice for reps and workers is a strong awareness of racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, classism and homophobia. And how these belief systems operate within partnerships and outside them, for example, in the local area and wider society. It's important to understand these topics if reps and

workers are to help others who work on Big Local navigate local dynamics of power and inequality. This can be critical in supporting people who work on Big Local to impact systemic issues of inequality in their area.

We have described a range of attitudes about EDI among the people who work on Big Local to whom we spoke. Understanding these perspectives will support Local Trust to design future learning and support opportunities and understand the context of discussions about EDI within Big Local areas. In the final findings section, we discuss what we found out about people who work on Big Local's appetite and interest in progressing EDI in the future.

What appetite is there for progressing EDI in Big Local areas?

Finally, we examined participants' appetite and interest in discussing EDI in the context of their Big Local's work and their learning and development. The findings from this research provide helpful insight into how EDI issues align with the Big Local programme's plans and interests. It should also help to inform how we might describe future learning and development opportunities for Big Local areas to support and encourage engagement.

All areas that we spoke to saw the relationship between EDI and their aspirations to broaden the reach and impact of their Big Local partnership's work within the community. We noted a clear appetite to connect discussions about EDI to Big Local planning processes and to respond to inequalities associated with the pandemic in future. Many areas also felt the resident-led nature of their work meant they had already been responding to EDI naturally by involving residents in decision-making and Big Local activities.

Yet simultaneously, EDI issues were not always being discussed by partnerships in

a systematic way that informs practice and decision-making. As identified above, we noticed a relatively limited breadth of discussion about EDI-related activity in Big Local areas.

The focus in most partnership areas was increasing engagement from specific community members on the partnership (particularly younger people and people from ethnic minority backgrounds). There is also a great deal of interest in responding to this among Big Local areas. Three partnerships also shared specific aspirations to improve partnership meetings' inclusiveness and create different ways for residents to connect with decision-making. Some Big Local partnerships also talked explicitly about the limits to the reach of their activities in the community and recognised this as an EDI issue affecting people with particular protected characteristics, such as disability, race and gender.

Some partnerships were highly interested in further support and engagement to improve their practice on EDI. One Big Local area, for instance, had already taken the initiative to visit another Big Local area to find out how they had been engaging with local BME communities so that they could improve aspects of their outreach practice. Another partnership decided to organise a partnership meeting focused on EDI after engaging with the research. However, when we spoke to reps and workers separately, they also stressed that partnership members are sometimes under a great deal of pressure to deliver on other topics that are seen as a priority. "Everyone is so busy with COVID and getting ready for 2026 [end of the programme]," said a worker. Some stressed that partnership members may not recognise they need further support on EDI and may not see improved practice on EDI as helping to achieve an influential legacy and impact. Nevertheless, there are opportunities to frame future work on EDI as an essential consideration that will help Big Local partnerships to achieve their goals in this sense.

Conclusions and recommendations

Overview of findings

Aptitude

People working on Big Local are already deploying an important range of skills and knowledge progressing EDI. We heard how people are drawing on community development approaches to involve residents and local expertise and networks to understand and respond to community needs.

Some areas identified where greater knowledge, skill and understanding could help to increase the impact on EDI. Yet, we also noticed some participants felt confident and assured that they were responding to local inequalities. Yet after further probing and questioning, participants were interested in further discussion and exploration to help improve their impact on EDI. There are opportunities to challenge, develop and explore new skills and knowledge in this respect, too – linked to some framework for self-reflection and self-assessment.

Attitude

We also noticed some trends and themes in attitudes when discussing and thinking about EDI. We saw divergent views about equality, diversity, and inclusion mean to people working on Big Local and their responsibilities in that regard. EDI is used as 'code' for things such as engagement, participation and representation. Still, there needs to be clarity on what equality, diversity, and inclusion mean in the

context of Big Local work. We noted limited levels of accountability and responsibility for progress on EDI. We heard about stereotypes and biases that can affect decisions. We listened to views from people with White British backgrounds who felt race and racism didn't affect them.

We also heard opinions about the limited scope and ambition of Big Local action on EDI and attitudes within partnerships and outside them that can lessen impact on responses to systemic inequalities in local areas.

Appetite

There is an appetite to deliver change, create an impact on EDI and ensure that a range of people benefit from Big Local activities. We heard about an interest to improve the diversity of partners and participants in Big Local activities. We discovered an interest in enhancing the inclusiveness of engagement and decision-making.

We also found people wanted equality to be part of the Big Local planning process. Communities recognise that COVID-19 has amplified inequalities in our society (for example, in mental health, employment, education, health and housing).

Recommendations: what does this mean for the future?

Local Trust seeks to strike an essential balance in supporting Big Local partnerships to progress and grow their ambitions in responding to EDI. A considerable strength of Big Local is the resident-led nature of the work.

Accordingly, Local Trust will seek to support rather than 'direct' Big Local partnerships to undertake specific activities. Yet, at the same time, we sensed an appetite among Big Local partnerships to make a more significant impact on EDI, learn from others and share information about the effect Big Local partnerships have in responding to local inequalities. In this sense, there is an open door.

Local Trust can choose how far it intervenes. Big Local partnerships are finding some areas more challenging and have less 'interest' to explore. But we've seen that some partnership members may not know or believe they would benefit from support on EDI.

Local Trust could use its position and resources to promote learning and self-reflection for those who wish to pursue it. Local Trust should do it in a non-directive way that reflects local context and is not 'one size fits all' while encouraging self-assessment, development, and reflection. In the remainder of this paper, we outline some opportunities we have identified regarding three topics:

- learning and development
- support structures
- creating systemic change

Learning and development: acting on what matters

The appetite and interest in improving the diversity of who sits on partnerships are important. However, at the same time, we heard that improving partnerships' diversity may be insufficient in driving change on equality in the local area if marginalised voices are not valued and if people with varied views and experiences are not engaged and heard in the wider community.

Having a more diverse partnership may give false assurance of progress on EDI if these voices are not included effectively in decision-making. We also heard how people working on Big Local are keen to improve their impact on EDI in the local community and to ensure that their plans and legacy respond to inequalities in their local area, some of which have been exacerbated considerably during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are opportunities to think strategically about how we support those working on Big Local to act on what matters to them and their local community. These ambitions run deeper than only getting more young people and BME people onto local partnerships.

This report outlines the following practices, skills and knowledge that participants have described as helpful in progressing aspects of EDI. There are opportunities to share these between Big Local areas through peer learning and guidance.

Inclusion within the partnership	Using community development skills to encourage ownership/confidence of residents from different backgrounds to lead partnership discussions Using codes of conduct and developing shared ownership of Big Local values that can be used to challenge inappropriate behaviour
Diverse engagement and participation of wider community	Adapting forms of organisational/governance structure that can support residents to have a voice Willingness to take a flexible approach to involve local people from different backgrounds and with varying levels of time and resources in decision-making (not only formal partnership meetings) Using different methods of outreach to engage and empower local people in the community (for example, resident-led projects with traditionally marginalised groups) Using varied methods of consultation and engagement of residents to understand their needs More community-led outreach and engagement adopted during the Covid-19 pandemic, elements of which may be useful to continue in the future
Progressing equality outcomes in the local area	Creating opportunities for the partnership to reflect on personal values, biases and interests and to reflect on how this impacts decisions made by the Big Local Community engagement that 'calls in' and encourages discussion about complex or challenging EDI issues to help promote cohesion and equality in the wider community

For Big Local partnerships seeking to increase the impact on inclusion, diversity and equality, we identified opportunities to build skills, knowledge and confidence of partnership members in the following areas too.

Inclusion within the partnership	Awareness of how partnership make-up can mirror local power dynamics and patterns of inequality along gender, race and class lines Recognising how power operates in local areas (for example, who has been involved in local decision-making before) and the impact of existing partnership members' behaviour and partnership 'culture' on prospective new members Understanding how to evaluate the inclusiveness of partnership decision-making and the impact of processes on traditionally marginalised groups (for example, reflective practice, surveys and 360-degree feedback) Understanding how to hear and engage with different and opposing views and different ways of communicating
Diverse engagement and participation of wider community	Understanding how perceptions/stereotypes held about the involvement of people from particular communities can affect actions of the Big Local Awareness of how partnership make-up can mirror local power dynamics and patterns of inequality along gender, race and class lines Ability to reflect on the purpose of engagement and how this can affect who is heard or who is on the partnership (for example, which skills and knowledge are valued?) Collecting and using evidence and feedback to understand if some parts of the community feel excluded from activities, physical spaces associated with Big Local or access to grants
Progressing equality outcomes in the local area	Awareness of other sources of evidence about local demography/inequalities (for example, reports by other community groups, local data on inequalities) By using other sources of evidence to improve assurance, people who work on Big Local are responding to a range of inequality issues – triangulating and comparing different sources of evidence Building partnerships with groups that support residents from traditionally marginalised backgrounds Recognising the impact of sexism, ageism, classism and racism in the local community and broader society and their impact on who is heard in decisions made by Big Local partnerships and the types of activities that are supported Understanding local perceptions about the 'fairness' of decisions made about Big Local use of resources and recognising the impact this can have on local community relations and cohesion

Support structures

To support people who work on Big Local in developing, practising and embedding some of these skills and knowledge in the future, we recommend creating a range of opportunities for learning and development.

The EDI Learning Cluster will offer some people who work on Big Local opportunities to learn about EDI more deeply, but we have heard through this study that not all people working on Big Local will see this as relevant to them.

There is an appetite to share learning from Big Local areas more widely, such as through guidance and peer learning. In sharing this learning, Local Trust has an opportunity to support the impact on EDI in a way that responds to local context and concerns. In particular, the Covid-19 pandemic has raised many new issues about inequality for Big Local areas, and many are currently planning their response and thinking about their work's legacy.

Using an EDI lens to consider this challenge and offering guidance and support on this would help those working on Big Local to think critically about their impact and respond in the local context. Local Trust acknowledges that many residents and partnership members may be turned off by some traditional ways of talking about EDI issues – seeing it as not relevant to their lives and their community. However, there is no reason for Local Trust to tread that familiar path if it feels something different is required.

Thinking about messaging and how to prompt self-reflection and learning will be crucial (and Local Trust has a great deal of expertise in doing this). For example, one local worker shared an idea of

running an 'exchange programme' where partnership members from Big Local areas in largely White British communities get an opportunity to connect with Big Local areas in ethnically diverse places. Connections would be through facilitated discussions about shared and different experiences and the relationships between race and class in our society.

Another rep suggested opportunities to involve partnership members in projects to understand more about their local area's history and changing demographics, and how that could be used to support a conversation about the Big Local adapting to changing needs.

To prompt and sustain interest in these types of learning and development activities, we see two opportunities to strengthen support structures for Big Local partnerships:

- Supporting and developing reps and workers
- Creating opportunities for self-assessment

Supporting and developing reps and workers

Developing some core competencies and learning opportunities for reps and workers would help to clarify their role and encourage self-reflection on development needs.

There is interest in peer learning and clearly some reps and workers (and indeed partnership members) with significant insight and experience who could support learning and development.

We identified some specific aspects of EDI practice where Big Local areas would value further support, such as ageism, classism, racism and sexism, but this is not an exhaustive list. This study identified the following types of competencies.

Technical and interpersonal skills and knowledge to support partnership members to learn and develop	Reps and workers will need to feel they can help build skills and knowledge within the partnerships described above. For example: - Supporting partnership members to become more aware of when they are acting on perceptions and stereotypes about particular groups and the impact this may be having on their decisions. - Supporting partnerships to develop their strategic priorities and a straightforward narrative about the causes of inequality in a local area and what they want their Big Local to achieve regarding this. - Adapting their approach to discussing EDI within a local context and the partnership's interests (for example, discussing anti-racism in predominantly White British communities). - Creating learning opportunities: listening actively to the views of partnership members and knowing when to 'call in' people to discuss and explore further and 'call out' and challenge inappropriate or exclusionary ideas.
Local knowledge	To support Big Local partnerships to make effective decisions on EDI, reps and workers have: - knowledge of local demographic context and local inequalities in outcomes for different social groups - knowledge of local sources of data/groups serving traditionally marginalised communities, and ability to help partnership members consider this in their work. - knowledge of the local political and cultural context and how Big Local partnerships may need to adapt to respond to this and progress equality in the local 'system'.
Self-reflection and awareness of bias and the impact of personal beliefs on practice	To effectively facilitate conversations about equality, diversity and inclusion, reps and workers should: - self-assess their gaps in knowledge, skills and confidence on EDI-related topics - recognise the impact of systemic inequality and discrimination on their personal views (and those of partnership members) about what is achievable or amenable to change - be aware of the impact of bias. They reflect on their understanding of racism, ableism, sexism and classism and use this personal awareness to support Big Local areas and partnership members.

Self-assessment and continuous improvement

Big Local partnerships are keen to ensure funding is spent within the programme's timeframe. Many partnerships are thinking about how they could achieve a visible and sustainable legacy, such as resourcing a physical building. Though timely deployment of resources is important, it is also vital not to restrict further consideration of the impact Big Local partnerships would like to make on inequality in their local area in future.

Suppose a Big Local partnership does not consider the diverse range of views and evidence about local forms of inequality or does not have an opportunity to think about its role in responding to local inequalities in its area and how it will judge its impact. In that case, the likelihood is that the activities and outcomes of the work will not progress equality as effectively as they could.

Local Trust sets out guiding [principles](#) and legislative duties, which those working on Big Local are to follow on EDI. However, scrutiny and accountability from Local Trust and reps on these topics are minimal and mainly reactive to particular incidents.

There are mixed messages around this agenda's importance and opportunities to develop a framework for self-assessment and learning on EDI, linked to a clear set of strategic organisational priorities on EDI for Local Trust. This does not need to be directive, for example, many Big Local partnerships want to respond to COVID-19's impact on inequality in their community, which could provide a valuable framework for discussion and planning. In particular, the assessment process for Big Local plans could include several questions about how Big Local areas will be responding to equality. These plans would need to be developed in partnership with reps and Big Local partnerships.

Question examples include:

- What does the partnership think are the main inequalities in the area?
- What does the partnership think are the leading causes of these inequalities?
- How does the Big Local plan to respond to inequality in the area, and how will it judge impact?
- How confident do partnerships feel that they include a range of traditionally marginalised groups and views from the local community in their planning?
- What evidence do they have that helps them feel confident about this?

Similarly, in the partnership review process, there may be opportunities to introduce more qualitative questions that explore inclusion issues in particular.

- How included do partnership members from different backgrounds feel in decisions?
- Do partnership members feel able to be themselves and share their views openly?
- How confident is the partnership in engaging with differing and traditionally marginalised views?

These assessment frameworks' purpose would not be to 'catch out' those working on Big Local, but to allow a more structured space for self-assessment and reflection. Partnerships' responses to these questions could be shared between Big Local areas to encourage dialogue and reflection. Should partnerships wish to receive it, this would also be an opportunity for reps, workers and Local Trust to provide additional support and guidance.

Creating systemic change

Finally, our report outlines some Big Local partnerships are thinking explicitly about the impact they can make on systems that maintain inequality in their local area. Some of those we spoke to are working to influence a range of agencies and communities on issues such as community views about immigration, children's rights in education, child sexual exploitation, responding to inequalities in the local job market and gang crime. Much of this is local in scope but has national ramifications. There are opportunities for Local Trust to showcase this work further and to learn from and amplify traditionally marginalised resident voices at a national policy level.

Many participants told us they valued Local Trust's input and support to pursue this work and the flexibility to choose what to do. But some also said to us that they hoped Local Trust would showcase and champion their work more in the future. Some people working on Big Local said their impact in responding to challenging issues of inequality in their local area and working behind the scenes in partnership with other agencies is not being recognised. Nor is it valued in the same way as other projects that might be more 'visible' or newsworthy. They described the Connects conference as symbolic in this regard. This is a space where Local Trust could build relationships with those working on Big Local that may not have felt heard or welcomed in the past and to show that it values their work and expertise.

We also identified an appetite for more collective action across Big Local partnerships on inequality in the future. Many people working across Big Local are concerned with inequality in their area,

and there is potential to support a broader movement for change on topics that span different places. Yet, divisions in our society (based on race, geographical location, age and so on) also run the risk of preventing different Big Local areas from seeing themselves as having much in common. Predominantly White British areas, for instance, may not see themselves as having much in common with ethnically diverse urban areas. Yet, as we have identified in this study, different types of areas describe experiencing some similar challenges in the way economic, social and political inequality are sustained. So, there are opportunities to support people working on Big Local to understand their shared experiences and differences better.

Big Local is a unique programme that draws on people's experiences living in disadvantaged areas across the country. It's an incredibly powerful voice for change.

While we are not advocating that people working on Big Local be forced to think about issues like racism, ageism or sexism for instance, we think it would support collective action across Big Local areas in the future. For example, understanding the intersections between race and class is important for including and valuing the voices of BME people in campaigning on poverty. While people who are racialised as Black, experience racism and inequality in a way that white people don't, they also share experiences of class discrimination and inequality based on where they are located in the UK.

Local Trust has an opportunity to kick-start this conversation and to build on the appetite that is already there to effect change across people working on the Big Local programme and wider society in the future.

Appendix

A brief overview of the characteristics of the eight areas that kindly participated in this research.

Area 1	Housing estate on the periphery of a large urban conurbation with a mix of social housing and shared ownership properties. Largely White British population (approximately one tenth BME). Relatively high proportion of partnership members aged 65+ compared to local population.
Area 2	Community within a coastal industrial area with high unemployment rates. Largely White British population. Partnership members largely representative compared to local population in terms of ethnicity, gender and age.
Area 3	Coastal, rural area. Relatively sparsely populated with a traditional focus on tourism for the local economy. Largely White British population (approximately one tenth BME). Relatively low representation of partnership members in terms of ethnicity compared to local population. Relatively high proportion of partnership members aged 65+ compared to local population.
Area 4	Inner city area. Local population relatively ethnically diverse (approximately a third from BME backgrounds). Relatively low proportion of partnership members in terms of ethnicity compared to local population.
Area 5	Multicultural neighbourhood situated in an area with established social housing estates in a large city. Local population highly ethnically diverse (approximately two thirds from BME backgrounds). Relatively low proportion of partnership members in terms of ethnicity compared to local population.
Area 6	Multicultural suburb in a large industrial town. Local population highly ethnically diverse (approximately four-fifths from BME backgrounds). Partnership members broadly representative compared to the local population in terms of ethnicity, gender and age.
Area 7	Coastal village. Well-established community with a high level of social housing. Partnership members broadly representative compared to the local population in terms of ethnicity, gender and age.
Area 8	Two large inner-city areas. Primarily White British population. Local population relatively ethnically diverse (approximately two fifths from BME backgrounds). A relatively high proportion of partnership members aged 65+ compared to local population.

About Local Trust

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

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding, and to draw on the learning from our work delivering the Big Local programme to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.



Local Trust

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