
Big Local Connects 2019: evaluation

A version of this paper was published internally by Local Trust in October 2019. This version has been lightly edited to make it accessible for a general audience, with core terms and concepts explained wherever possible.

Background

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live. As well as funding, it offers support to areas as part of a comprehensive learning and networking programme. This programme includes the annual Connects event. Connects is an annual celebration for all 150 Big Local areas¹ where attendees can learn, network, and build relationships. Local Trust held the second Big Local Connects on 13 and 14 September 2019 at the East Midlands Conference Centre in Nottingham.

The objectives for Connects 2019 were for attendees to:

- reaffirm that Big Local is resident led
- see themselves as part of a national programme putting change in the hands of residents across England
- meet others working on Big Local to share experiences, ideas, and opportunities for collaboration
- hear about and influence the latest developments in the support programme
- find out what is happening outside of Big Local
- gather ideas to take back to their partnership
- develop a stronger connection with Local Trust.

Local Trust evaluated Connects to draw out learning from the event. Interviews and surveys of Big Local area attendees, trustees, and staff members provided the feedback for this evaluation. There were 124 attendee feedback responses compared to 126 last year.

This report sets out the findings on what worked well and what can be improved for future Connects events.

¹ Big Local areas are neighbourhoods selected by the National Lottery Community Fund to receive at least £1m. Local Trust is working with 150 Big Local areas.

Who attended?

There were 290 Big Local area attendees for Connects 2019. A smaller number of areas attended compared to the previous year (110 Big Local areas attending in 2019, compared to 16 less than 2018).

No matter where an event is held, it will be easier for some areas to travel there than others. Nottingham is very accessible from some parts of the country, but less so from others. The areas with the lowest attendance were the south-east and south-west.

Sessions and content

The table below shows the sessions or managed spaces that attendees most frequently mentioned positively in their feedback. The top sessions were 'Doing meetings differently' and 'Well-being and mindfulness space'.

Most mentioned sessions	Frequency
Doing meetings differently	10
Well-being and mindfulness space	10
Beyond the foodbank – cook tasty food on a budget	9
Learning from failure	8
Marketplace [stalls]	8

Attendee feedback on 'doing meetings differently' included that it: "challenged [me] to think about how to make meetings less off-putting for those not used to a formal meeting environment".

Networking was the most mentioned part of Connects by attendees (26 times) which confirms previous feedback that networking is an important part of Big Local events for attendees. Most people felt that there was adequate time for networking, and they could network with others 'quite a bit' (44 per cent) or 'to a great extent' (42 per cent).

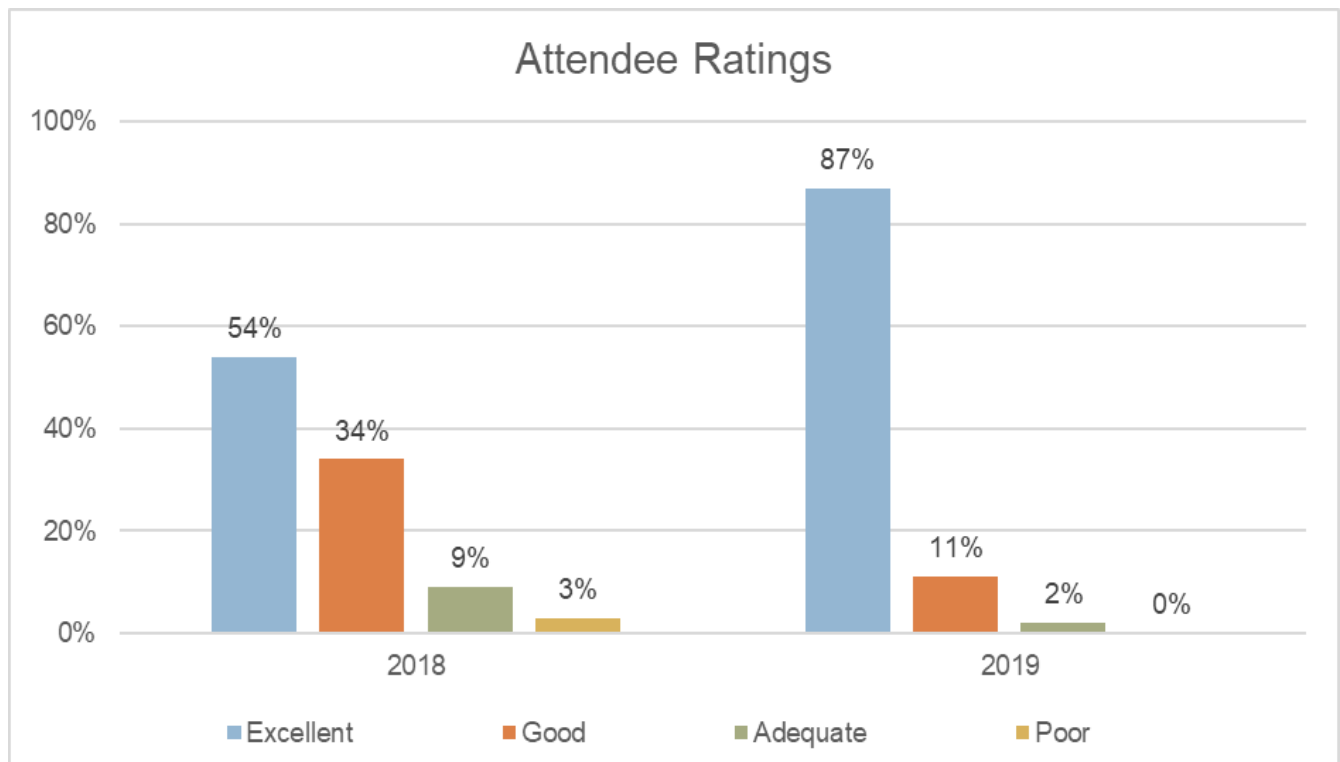
It's clear that people valued the more flexible, drop-in spaces as much as the formal sessions and this is something we should continue at future events.

Generally, staff leading in the rooms for sessions felt that the level of choice and variety was very good. Some people felt that the sessions were too short or 'rushed' in cases where multiple people were presenting. Several people fed back that they felt there was a lot on, and we could consider whether to repeat more content in future years. We need to balance this with ensuring that there is a good diversity of content, and the buzz of a busy event is maintained.

Attendee experience

Overall attendee rating and expectations

Overall, most attendees at Connects rated it as excellent or good. Ratings from attendees showed a large improvement from 2018, with 98 per cent rating Connects 2019 positively compared to 2018 where 88 per cent of attendees rated Connects positively. As outlined in the chart below, by far the largest proportion of responses were “excellent” (87 per cent) and none rated the event “poor”.



Several things came together to ensure a better overall experience compared to 2018, including: improved venue accessibility; improved catering; bigger capacity in sessions, reducing the number of people turned away; more time and space built in for networking; and several different ways to engage with the event (sessions; marketplace stalls; drop-in spaces).

“I'd think Local Trust put a lot of extra time and energy into making this Big Local Connects bigger and better than last year. Also, in doing things differently. I thought lots of things worked well, and I took some valuable things away from the event.”

“I wasn't sure what to expect, as I had never been to a Connects event before, but it completely exceeded my expectations. I never for one minute thought I would laugh and have as much fun as I did. Great event!! Looking forward to next year!”

Event organisation

Venue

Venue ratings were high (90% said the venue was excellent, 8% said it was good).

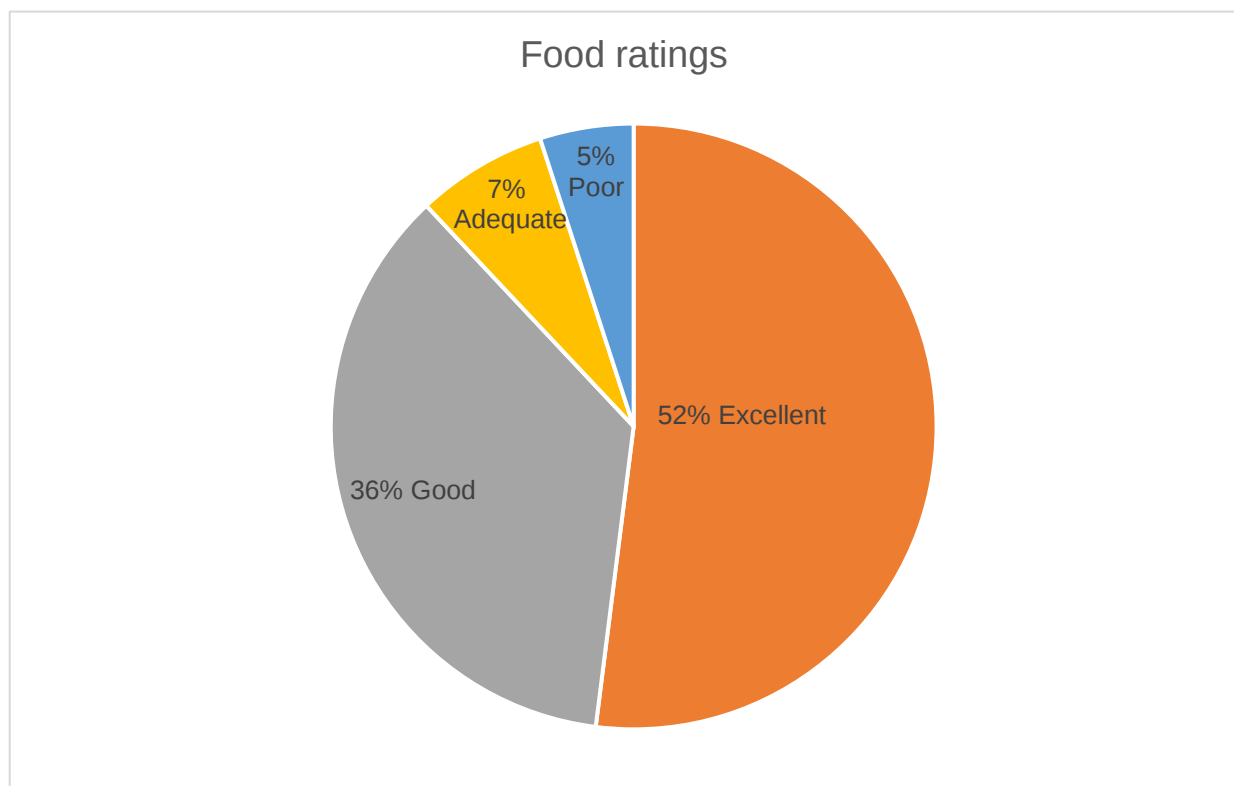
Location

As noted above, Nottingham was perhaps not as easy to access as London for some attendees. The ability to drive added flexibility for some areas or those with mobility issues, however, and the location was rated positively by 96 per cent of respondents.

Food and drink

Food is a key part of event organisation and can have a big impact upon people's experiences. In 2019, 88 per cent of attendees rated the food positively, and while comparable data is not available for 2018 it was clear that the food significantly affected the overall rating that year.

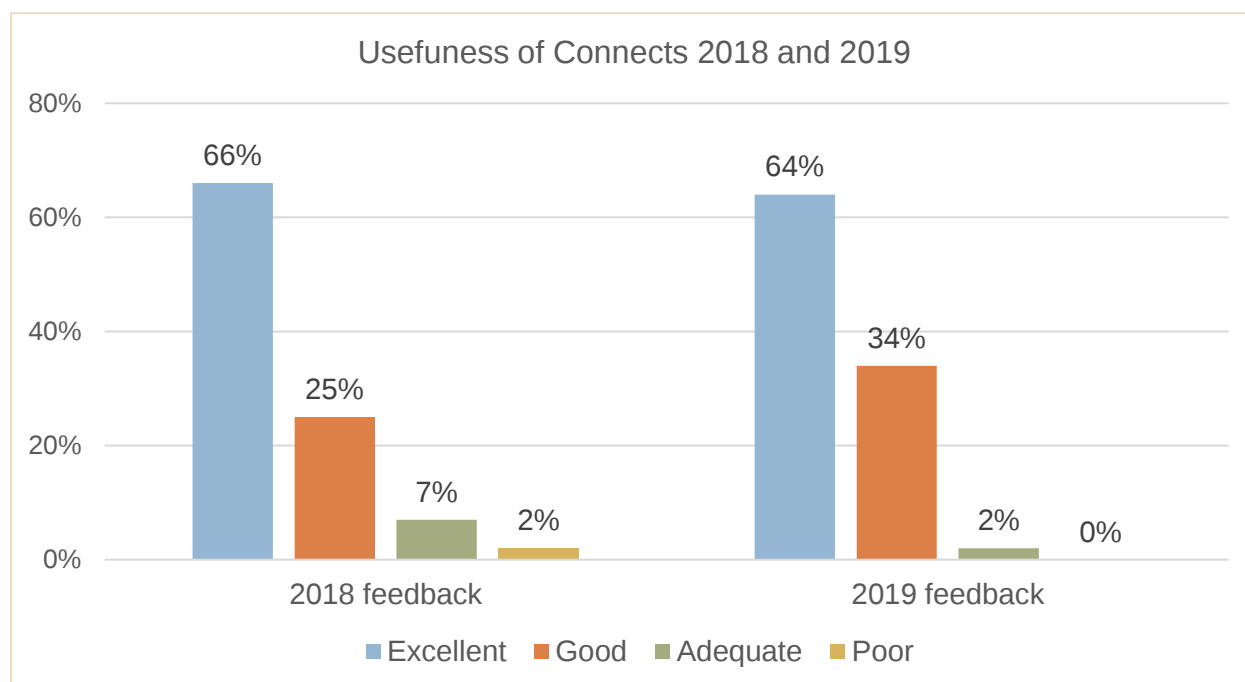
In 2019, although steps were taken by Local Trust to address and prevent issues, some problems remained. Going forward venue staff need to be fully consistent and knowledgeable on dietary issues, and we should consider printed menus on tables that people can refer to. Several attendees also mentioned the limited availability of soft drinks, particularly compared to the selection of alcoholic drinks.



Usefulness, enjoyment, and learning

Usefulness of Connects

Most attendees found the event useful. In total, 98 per cent rated the usefulness of Connects positively, compared to 91 per cent in 2018.



"Well done for a fantastic two days, I've learnt so much and talked to so many other people, this was such an incredible and positive experience."

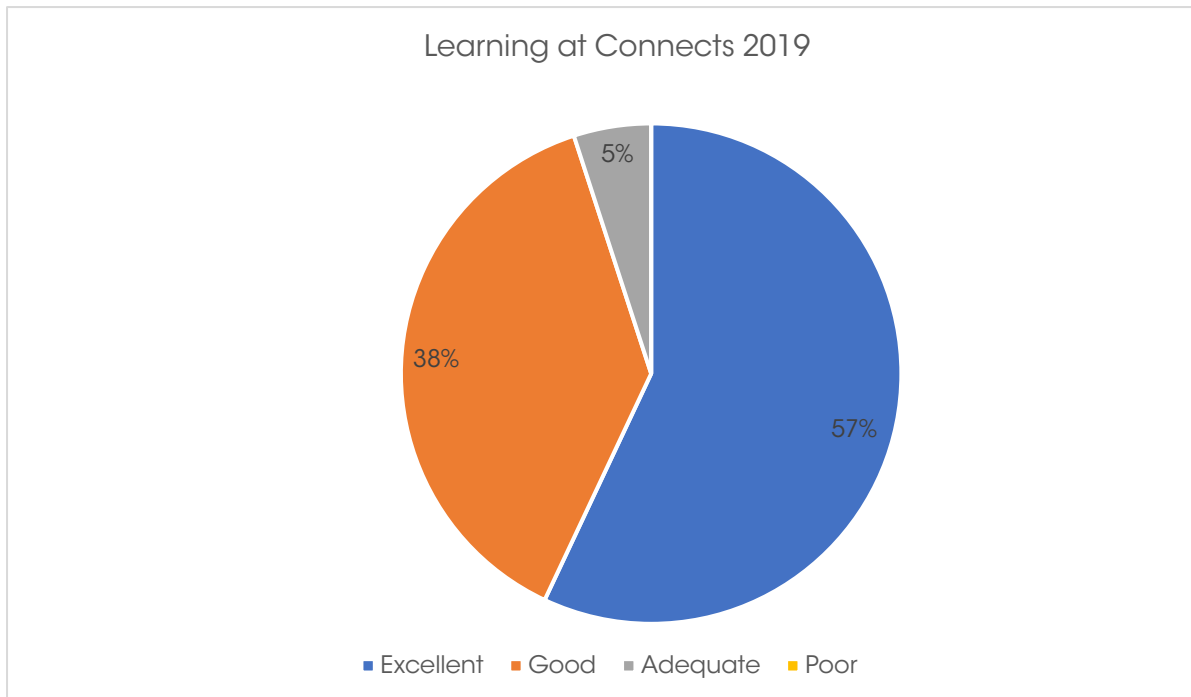
Enjoyment

Almost all attendees (97 per cent) said that they enjoyed Connects. There were many comments saying how welcoming, supportive, approachable, and helpful staff were.

Learning

While 95 per cent of attendees thought the learning aspect of Connects was positive, this had the second-lowest percentage of "excellent" responses after food. Two common themes from those rating learning as "good" was that they struggled to take anything practical or applicable away from the session(s) they went to, and that they would have liked more time for networking.

"This is a great learning event for residents. You learn from the sessions and much more from meeting other groups and hearing their stories."



Diversity and inclusion issues

Several attendees noted issues with diversity and inclusion throughout their responses. Many of these concerned the availability of Halal food. Although a prayer room was available during the event, several attendees arrived early on the Friday and needed a room to pray.

Several comments were received related to the diversity represented by speakers, panels, and the Local Trust materials. A clear steer was given to session leads in 2020 that there should be no all-male panels.

Conclusion and recommendations

The feedback results from Connects have been extremely positive. Big Local area attendees, staff, and trustees all consistently highlighted how well organised and enjoyable the event was. The feedback from attendees shows that the overall satisfaction increased from 2018 and that the issues and challenges from 2018 were considered and well managed for 2019.

However, there is still some space for improvement. The consistent issue that arose and one that some attendees stated was an issue at other Big Local events was ensuring an inclusive environment for all participants, particularly around the catering. Supporting greater networking and for attendees to take something practical from each session would also improve the overall experience for some people.

Recommendations for future events

- Consider how we can support areas that feel it is difficult to make the journey to Nottingham.
- It's clear that people valued the more flexible, drop-in options as much as the formal sessions.

- Consider limiting the number of speakers in a session.
- Improvements could be made around the pre-information available through sign up and the programme to help people make the most out of the event.
- There is scope to improve on what people are learning from Connects.

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

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