Learning cluster review report

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

Introduction

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. Learning clusters were launched in February 2018 as part of Local Trust's new learning and networking offer.

The purpose of Local Trust's learning cluster programme is to:

- create cohorts of areas that can learn and develop with each other
- give areas access to the experiences, learning and expertise of others
- support individuals develop expertise and gain technical knowledge
- enable areas to identify opportunities for collaboration, co-funding, and other
- share challenges and explore solutions
- create meaningful connections between people involved in Big Local
- be a safe space for people to share challenges, find solutions and work practically together.

Each learning cluster is based on a particular topic or theme that has been identified as relevant by Big Local areas.[1] Initially four topic-based clusters were offered: legacy, housing, coastal communities and youth exploitation and violence. Learning clusters were delivered over at least four sessions spanning most of 2018.

This report explores firstly how the learning clusters developed peer learning between participants. It then considers the specialist approach of clusters as topic-based learning. The report also explores how participants were able to shape and direct content throughout

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.

the sessions. It is based on observation of the clusters and feedback from participants through both conversations and evaluation forms.

Developing peer learning

One of the most important aims of the learning clusters is to bring multiple areas together to learn and network with each other. Learning clusters allowed for participants to develop meaningful connections with each other through meeting together over multiple sessions. They also aimed to create a space to share challenges, frustrations and find solutions together.

Big Locals learning from each other

Across the four clusters, there were plenty of opportunities for participants to learn and develop with each other. This was facilitated by both the networking opportunities throughout the sessions and the increased familiarity of the group from having met in the same context multiple times.

Networking is very important to Big Local areas and all clusters provided many opportunities for formal and informal networking. Evaluation forms showed that 84 per cent of participants found the opportunities to share and network with other Big Local areas most useful.

Maintaining networking between clusters

The four clusters used different methods to facilitate networking in between sessions. Participants were asked to buddy up with someone from another Big Local area and contact them in between sessions. One successful example of buddying was when two participants from one cluster agreed to contact their local MPs and followed up with each other to ensure they had both done it.

Creating meaningful connections between participants

Overall, feedback suggested that participants created meaningful connections with each other. Over the course of the sessions, participants were more open about sharing challenges and frustrations with each other. This may not have happened if it was a one-off event.

Action learning as a way to focus discussions

Action learning was only used explicitly in one cluster. Participants, who were perhaps apprehensive at first, experienced a 'bumpy beginning' but could see the value in the process by the end. One participant who was negative about the approach going into it even wanted to take it back to their partnership to try.

The specialist approach

Learning clusters are topic-based, giving participants access to the experiences, learning and expertise of others around a particular theme or issue.

Supporting individuals to develop expertise and gain technical knowledge

Feedback on the clusters showed that they maintained a good balance of external expertise and knowledge of Big Local areas. Bringing in external expertise was an important way to develop participants' technical skills.

Enabling areas to identify opportunities for collaboration

Some clusters put an emphasis on bringing in external expertise that would be relevant to participants. One particular benefit noted in feedback was those external speakers that

could integrate Big Local work into systems and policies nationally, and help participants think of the 'bigger picture'.

Funding as a way to encourage areas to test new projects

As part of one cluster, Local Trust offered to match fund grants up to £2,500 for areas to test a new way of addressing youth violence and/or exploitation. To qualify for the grants, the activity had to be relevant to the cluster and something that the area had not already planned. Seven areas applied for and received the pilot grant. Overall, the pilots were an effective way to get areas to test new activities and share their learning throughout the cluster. Some Big Local areas found it hard to decide on a pilot project.

Managing broad topics

Clusters, as mentioned above, are topic-based with the topics being quite broad. In some instances, the breadth of the topics meant some participants were only interested in one aspect of the topic. Reflecting this, the evaluation forms show that participants had mixed responses to whether they had got everything they wanted out of it. Across the four clusters, an average of 45 per cent of participants said they got everything out of it, going as low as 25 per cent in one cluster up to 60 per cent in another.

Participants engaged differently with specialist content and external expertise depending on their level of experience and knowledge and whether they were at the sessions out of personal interest or working on a specific Big Local project. This is something that facilitators should keep in mind, especially when managing broad topics.

Evidence of self-directed learning

The clusters all allowed for opportunities for participants to shape and direct learning. While it is important to allow for self-directed learning among participants, the facilitators should also play a role in shaping content to ensure it stays relevant and focused. There were times that participants asked for something in the next session, only to realise it wasn't exactly what they were interested in.

Perhaps most encouraging about the new format of these learning and networking events is that in comparing the evaluation forms across the four sessions for each cluster, the number of participants who rated the session as 'excellent' increased steadily up to the final session. The average rating of 'excellent' for the first meeting across all clusters was 43 per cent and for the fourth session it was 89 per cent. This increase in satisfaction of events highlights how over time, facilitators and organisers were able to take feedback from participants and tailor sessions to the needs of the participants.

Conclusion

The first round of clusters achieved their objectives as laid out in the beginning of this report. They proved to be effective in developing relationships and connections between participants and creating a cohort of people who were able to learn, share challenges and begin to identify solutions with each other. They also introduced external speakers who had expert knowledge and could support Big Local areas to think about the bigger picture and identify opportunities for collaboration.

As with any new programme or event, the review revealed small areas for improvement to consider in future learning clusters. Overall, the clusters proved to be a promising approach to learning and networking which allowed participants to learn over a longer period of time and shape content, ensuring it was tailored to what they wanted to learn.

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

CAN Mezzanine | 7-14 Great Dover Street | London SE1 4YR
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