The role of the rep in the Big Local programme

A version of this paper was published internally by Local Trust in February 2018. This version has been lightly edited to make it accessible for a general audience, with core terms and concepts explained wherever possible. Since this report has written, the role of the rep and the context in which they are working has changed, although many aspects that this report has highlighted remain important. Where there has been a significant change, this is noted in the footnotes.

Introduction

Big Local is a resident-led funding programme providing people in 150 areas in England with £1.15m each to spend across 10–15 years to create lasting change in their neighbourhoods. In 2018, the Big Local programme was well underway, delivering in all 150 areas. Local Trust[1], the organisation set up to deliver the programme, looked at areas' changing support needs in light of this, including the role of the Big Local rep.

Reps are individuals appointed by Local Trust to offer tailored support to a Big Local area and share successes, challenges and news with the organisation and are a critical part of the Big Local delivery infrastructure. This research aimed to gain a greater understanding of the rep role and consider what would enhance the way this important resource is delivered.

The objectives of the research are to:

- inform Local Trust about the best support that reps provide or might potentially provide local areas
- explore areas' support needs, and how they might differ in terms of needs/demands on reps, including differences related to the stage of Big Local
- enable Local Trust to make decisions about how the role of the rep might need to change or develop going forward
- give reps a voice about their role and share their experience so far

What the research cannot do is provide value judgements on the merits of particular reps or a systematic exploration of the management of reps.

1 Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live.

The role of reps in Big Local

Reps have been a mainstay of the Big Local programme. In the beginning, the role helped establish Big Local in the 150 areas by bringing together and forming Big Local partnerships and assisting areas to develop their first plans. For wave 1 areas, reps pre-dated the establishment of Local Trust.[2]

Just over a third of Big Local areas have only had one rep throughout the programme. At the other extreme, other areas have experienced more frequent rep turnover, with over 20 areas having had three or more reps so far.

The reps' support has been highly rated in Big Local areas, with 86-89 per cent of partnership members rating their reps 'very helpful' or 'helpful' across a range of questions relating to support, and only 6-8 per cent rating them 'not very helpful' or 'not at all helpful' in the partnership members' survey that took place in 2016.

Methodology

The research included analysing existing data and speaking to multiple stakeholders, with just under 80 people involved in interviews. The different research elements were:

- scoping interviews with Renaisi[3] and Local Trust staff
- desk research, including looking at rep reports
- five focus groups with reps, involving 47 reps in total
- five case-study areas, interviewing 23 people including reps, chairs, partnership members, workers and Locally Trusted Organisation (LTO) staff.[4]

The research topic guides were designed in response to issues that emerged from the scoping interviews and desk research. The case-study areas were identified taking into account factors such as geographical spread, spend, and how many reps there had been in the area. The areas are not identified in the report.

Report layout

This report is divided into two main parts.

Part one: reps' tasks and supporting areas

This looks at current practice as of 2018. It identifies what reps do, how this may vary between areas, the skills needed by reps to carry out these core functions of the role and reps' support needs.

Part two: the rep role going forwards

This explores how Local Trust staff and the case-study areas see areas' support needs going forwards and examines reps' own views for the future of the role.

2 A phased approach was taken to identifying and agreeing the 150 Big Local areas. Three waves of 50 areas were brought on stream in July 2010 (wave one), February 2012 (wave two) and December 2012 (wave three). See this paper for more information.

3 Until April 2019, reps were managed by Renaisi, a contractor of Local Trust. In 2019 this was brought in-house.

4 A locally trusted organisation is the organisation chosen by people in a Big Local area or the partnership to administer and account for funding, and/or deliver activities or services on behalf of a partnership. Areas might work with more than one locally trusted organisation depending on the plan and the skills and resources required.

Part one: reps' tasks and supporting areas

This section firstly outlines the role of the rep, noting the tasks that reps undertake and which of their contributions were most valued by the case-study areas, the reps and Local Trust staff, along with the skills reps need to achieve these. It then moves on to exploring possible differences in support needs between Big Local areas, before briefly examining the support needs of reps themselves.

Role of the rep

The rep assignment outlines the role that the rep has in each Big Local area. In general, reps are meant to be the 'eyes and ears' of Local Trust, helping areas achieve their vision. Underlying this, the rep should maintain a 'light touch' role with the emphasis on building the skills and confidence of residents to manage Big Local themselves by advising and facilitating. The reps' tasks are grouped into three main areas of activity:

- **The Big Local partnership:** providing support, advice and appropriate challenge to the partnership and ensuring that they operate in line with Local Trust guidance
- **Big Local plan:** supporting the partnership in creating, submitting, and reviewing their Big Local plans
- **Provide a link between the area, Local Trust and partners:** maintaining an oversight of finances, promoting Local Trust in the area, undertaking quality assurance, highlighting significant issues and sharing learning

Cutting across all three of these are reporting requirements about different aspects of the partnership's activities, in addition to other reporting duties, such as progress and end of assignment reports.

Rep tasks and how they are valued

Through the research case-study areas, reps, Local Trust staff and Renaisi staff[5] discussed key tasks that reps perform. They are grouped here under the following broad themes, which often cut across the main areas of activity as laid out in the assignment:

- **Supporting the partnership:** building confidence, supporting the partnership to create new or revised plans, signposting, stepping back to let partnerships make decisions
- **Being the link between the area, Local Trust and partners:** referring to the Big Local rules and guidelines, reminding the partnership and partners, such as LTOs, of the Big Local ethos
- **Relationship building and conflict resolution:** the rep can build the partnership and facilitate communication and help deal with conflict when it arises
- **Reporting to Local Trust and Renaisi:** providing quarterly progress reports, partnership reviews, facilitating plan reviews and communicating significant issues to Local Trust and Renaisi

Each of these are explored in more detail below.

Supporting the partnership

There was agreement in the rep focus groups that confidence building was an important aspect of their role and helped the partnership make progress. Building confidence was seen to help partnerships "become more rigorous in their decision making", as one rep said. This

5 Renaisi took part in a scoping interview for this research. They also explored the main areas of rep activity in their own research: Renaisi. (2017) *A review of the role and impact of Renaisi on the Big Local programme*. pp. 5-7.

way of supporting the partnership was important so they could take ownership and be able to continue this in the future.

Some reps identified how, with the community development ethos and 'light touch' approach to the programme, there was only so far they could step in to directly support the partnership. One rep highlighted that there were circumstances when they had to step back and let:

> "…issues play out, obviously keeping an eye on the impact of that and how that works and check that people are learning and developing through the process."

In addition, reps used problem-solving skills and 'nudging' to provide partnerships with options, information, and learning, including from other Big Local areas. They used different skills to build confidence and raise aspirations, such as being positive and reassuring in relation to their ideas, progress, and the decisions they had made.

However, some reps also described their support to partnerships in a 'mentoring' or therapeutic capacity and felt that this emotional support had a negative impact on their time and capacity and was also not in their assignment. Local Trust staff focus group observed that whilst most reps maintained an appropriate distance, there were times when reps could sometimes get too emotionally involved in areas. Local Trust had recognised the need to address issues of support around the emotional side of community leadership and were looking to develop more support for chairs in this space. Between 2017-2018 new conflict-resolution support had been introduced, which it was hoped would also take some of the emotional burden of managing more difficult conflict away from reps (see below). The new conflict mediation service would be providing training for reps in mediation and conflict management during 2018.

Signposting was another way that reps supported the partnership. The signposting that was most valued by case-study areas was when reps pointed out what other Big Local areas were doing, either by sharing learning of other Big Local areas or sharing contact details. Case-study areas noted that reps had knowledge of other examples from within the Big Local programme that they bring and that, as one chair put it:

> "[the] rep has always been an extra source of information, in particular how other areas have approached issues has been really useful to have somebody working with, and aware of what's gone on in other areas, where that can help us think through what our approach needs to be."

This could be a useful way for case-study areas to gauge if they are on the right track and to network and learn from other Big Local areas.

There was discussion about a number of reps having skills relating to specialist issues, such as partnerships becoming constituted organisations or issues around land and buildings. Some reps saw this as a key part of the role going forwards, as discussed in part two. However, not all reps felt that they needed to have this specialist knowledge themselves and emphasised the signposting function element of the rep role. One rep commented:

"The specialism isn't one of the skills you need as a rep. As a rep you need to spot the specialism required."

This sentiment was echoed in the staff interviews. A Local Trust staff member said:

"The list of the things they could do in areas is enormous because all the areas are different and at different stages. It's about us having a person on the ground, they're our frontline person. So, they'll not necessarily have all the skills to do everything that comes up, nor would we expect them to."

An important part of the role was to ask awkward questions and get the partnership thinking about the future. While there was agreement in some case-study areas that the rep challenges partnership, one worker noted that the rep in the area may not be as challenging as they should be:

'I'm not sure whether we have had so much challenge from the rep…I don't think that's a particular strength in terms of that challenge in the rep's role.'

To be able to challenge the partnership, it was important for reps to, as one partnership member[6] said, "take a detached, pragmatic view about what is going on" based on the Big Local aims and ethos. Reps also reported using facilitation skills to challenge the partnership to think ahead or to focus on the current plan and priorities. This was done through both formal facilitated away days and meetings, and by more subtle ways of shaping discussions by asking probing questions and offering alternatives.

Being the link between the area, Local Trust and partners

Referring to the Big Local rules and guidelines

It was generally felt by all of those surveyed that reps represent Local Trust at the local level by referring to Big Local rules and regulations. One worker noted that part of the rep's role was to be the:

"link between them and Local Trust…[and] translate things into what they really mean for the area."

Some reps saw themselves as 'the face of the programme'. Representing Local Trust also gave them more authority. One rep noted that:

6 An individual who is part of the Big Local partnership group.

"when you tell a partnership that you have contacted Local Trust and they say this on the matter, it helps resolve [it]."

Reminding the partnership and partners of the Big Local ethos

Communicating the ethos of Big Local to partners was an important part of the role for reps to take on. Part of the role of the rep is communicating the message of the programme to partners. While there was agreement among reps that this was more prominent during the beginning of the programme, it was noted that this role had continued, especially when new partnership members joined. This was especially important for LTOs, and crucially when Big Local partnerships had new LTOs.

Relationship building and conflict resolution

Reps dealt with conflict but also worked at relationship building in order to prevent conflicts emerging in the first place. One case study area acknowledged the diplomatic skills used by their rep in managing their "difficult" partnership by bringing people together, being "approachable" and by managing them. A former chair noted: "...she was really good, how she manoeuvred everybody". Reps specifically saw partnership meetings as important opportunities for them to identify and respond to problems early before they escalated. One rep said:

"I don't know if that was envisaged at the start, but [partnership meetings are] the best way to take the pulse. To spot problems before they are emerging."

However, this preventative approach was not always possible. And although reps were performing roles in mediation and conflict resolution, not all reps felt these were skills that they had. Local Trust staff shared that view, noting that whilst many reps had successfully managed difficult relationships in their areas, there were times when rep involvement had made conflicts worse either by intervening at the wrong time or by providing an inappropriate level of support. In some cases conflict had become worse when reps themselves were perceived by local residents to be taking sides or becoming involved as parties to the conflict.

One of the main challenges that reps highlighted was maintaining a light touch approach while managing conflicts. There was agreement in focus groups that there were situations in Big Local areas in which reps had to overstep the 'light touch' role as outlined in their assignment. Additionally, some reps struggled with how they would maintain light touch while dealing with conflict, and one rep articulated the challenges:

" …how far does a rep go in conflict resolution and what sort of role do we have? Do we act as a buffer? Are we a facilitator? Do we act as representing the partnership, defending them? Be some outside body? There's a variety of roles there."

How dealing with conflict fitted within the core duties of the rep role was debated by Local Trust staff. Dealing with conflict on some level, alongside networking and mentoring, was seen as part of the core duties.

> "There are some things I wouldn't expect some of the reps to do, that go beyond the strengths we have recruited on, but with the conflict, networking and mentoring they should all be able to do that, even if it is at a low level." (Local Trust staff member)

Concerns related to the need for good judgement about when to escalate a situation and doing so speedily.

Reporting to Local Trust and Renaisi

Reps described reporting as part of the 'core' or 'standard' tasks that they perform. One commented:

> "[Reporting] is the core – do the review, do the plan, make sure they're on track, make sure they are legal – which we would all recognise."

Reps noted that it could be difficult at times to complete different reports and reviews, especially if there were, as one rep said, "no problems". However, attending partnership meetings was an easier way to keep track of what they are doing and that helps when reporting back to Local Trust. Another rep described how some Big Local areas might not feel like they have achieved that much but writing it out in a quarterly report shows how much they have done in the last three months.

Local Trust staff highlighted the importance of the quarterly reporting cycle as a critical way of keeping in touch with what was going on in areas, focusing their attention within the programme and providing early warning of emerging issues. In general, this worked well.

How the rep role varies between areas

Rep support for an area can vary greatly. Whether this was due to the style of the rep or needs of the area, or a mixture of both, was not always clear. Although the rep assignment is the same for each area, the way it has been performed has varied.

> "Every single area is different, and every rep has to respond to each area differently. So never one size fits all." (Rep)

Quarterly rep reports indicate that there can be a notable variation in time spent between areas, and also between a rep's areas when they have more than one area. Reps spoke about more demanding areas, including reps with more than one area often identifying a more 'difficult' area(s) or at least being needier than their other areas. There were many different reasons given for the variation between areas and approaches.

- **Peaks and troughs in each area**: Areas go through periods where they do not require support and times where they require a lot of support
- **Difficult/dysfunctional partnership**: A rep gave example of not being concerned about missing a partnership meeting in some areas, but in another he will never miss one because they are quite a dysfunctional partnership

- **Partnership's approach:** The attitudes of partnerships about how they work together and with the wider community is different, and this affects how reps work in each area
- **Different approaches of reps:** It is not just the areas that are different, but the reps have different approaches as well. One rep commented:" We can be wildly different in our approaches. I wonder if there was another rep sitting here would they encouraging different things, trying different things, challenging in a different way. It shapes the whole direction".
- **Presence of a worker versus no worker:** There was disagreement amongst reps about whether a worker reduces workload for rep or increases it. Some workers are not proactive, others "go in all directions". Where there is a good worker, it can mean that there is more happening in the area, which can lead to more advice/guidance being needed. In the few cases where there is no worker, this can lead to extra work for reps

As well as this, reps with multiple areas balance and vary the amount of time they spend in areas. Often one area is quiet when another is busy, and in certain cases reps balance more difficult areas with lower maintenance areas, giving more time to the former.

Support for reps

The current support that reps receive from Local Trust and Renaisi was not explored in detail. However, when asked about their support needs going forwards, several issues were identified.

Overall, reps were happy with the support from Local Trust, although sometimes felt guidance could be clearer and reps could be 'backed up' more over certain issues in areas. This often related to Big Local being programme underpinned by the principle of resident-led decision-making, and definitive answers therefore not always being possible or appropriate because they would be a matter for the partnership.

There was also uncertainty for some reps about who to contact at Local Trust about a particular issue. Furthermore, in some cases there was uncertainty about when to contact Renaisi and when to contact Local Trust. They tended to contact both, for different reasons.

Discussion: reps' tasks and supporting areas

The reps' tasks outlined broadly correlate to what is in the rep assignment, although some were discussed in more detail by reps and case-study areas than others. There was one noticeable contrast in the data between what role the reps said they did that did not appear in case study data and that was regarding building confidence of partnership members. Reps noted that this was an important role for them, and it is also outlined in the rep assignment. There was a slight mismatch in the data when analysing the tasks and one interpretation of this is that residents did not realise this role that reps played. However, there was consensus between reps, the case-study areas, and Local Trust about the value of the outside view that reps brought as part of challenging partnerships.

The importance of another rep task that generated a large amount of agreement between reps, case-study areas and Local Trust staff was around conflict resolution and mediation. Reps noted that conflict resolution and mediation often took a disproportionate amount of time, whether it was providing 'emotional support' or getting pulled into conflict by partnership members or workers. Sometimes there is an issue of getting too involved, or not reporting significant issues early enough.

It was also apparent that reps spent more time in some areas than others, and this was frequently managed, by those with multiple areas, by supporting areas with lower support

needs less. For those reps with just one area if the area was 'difficult' they did not have this option. The implications of there being areas that are more challenging than others are revisited in the conclusion.

Finally, there are potential challenges in the rep management set up, with reps managed by a third party.[7] The extent to which the arrangement affected communication flows was not clear, but there certainly appears to be scope to develop and improve the flow of information from the areas via reps and to likewise make sure appropriate and up-to-date information from Local Trust flows to the areas.

7 After this report was published internally, the management of reps was brought in-house to Local Trust.

Part two: the rep role going forwards

A key part of the research is exploring what the rep role might look like going forwards and consider whether the role needs to change in any way as areas get further down the line in Big Local.

This section explores the case-study areas and Local Trust staff's views on support needs going forward, including the role of the rep. The views of the reps themselves are also explored. In assessing what was needed from the rep role going forward, the changing nature of the role and face to face support in general over different stages of the programme was considered.

How the rep role has changed over time

The reasons given why demands on the reps had changed over time varied. These factors could be longer term, others related to when particular challenges had been overcome.

Ebbs and flows in the area

There were instances in the case-study areas where the rep role had become less intense for the time being because a specific challenge or set of challenges had been overcome. This included divisive partnership members moving on, a more effective LTO being engaged and an underperforming worker being dismissed. In certain cases, it was emphasised that while the role was not currently as intense as it was, this was due to particular barriers being overcome, and these or other challenges could arise again, necessitating greater rep time once more.

However, for some areas certain issues had never gone away; engaging people in Big Local remained a significant challenge, for instance. This included the composition of the partnership itself in terms of meeting the minimum number of residents, as well as reflecting the broader community. It was felt the burden fell to just a few people and there needs to be someone on the ground to spot pressure points.

> "There is a certain few, there's a certain group of like-minded people who are community-minded who don't mind giving. It is the same everywhere." (Big Local resident)

Life cycle of the programme

Some of reps' tasks were perceived to change in relation to the stage of Big Local. Reps were seen by Local Trust staff and the case-study areas as having had an especially valued role in the beginning of the programme. One Local Trust staff member said:

> "When the programme was established, the reps… were the boots on the ground that got this thing going. So, they are quite invested in the programme and the programme wouldn't be here if weren't for the boots on the ground they provided us with."

Case-studies areas felt that the role of the reps in helping to establish the partnership and getting the first plan endorsed was important in these areas. However, in certain instances it was felt that the intensity of the role had lessened over time (although of course a new plan is

needed every few years). This was also linked to partnerships becoming more confident and the employment of workers.

> "Because the whole point of the project has been to empower residents, to give them the confidence and skills to make things happen. And I think that is happening now." (Big Local chair)

> "Over the last couple of years, we have a learnt so much and got a lot more confident in our abilities. So, I don't think we need quite so much hand holding. But I wouldn't go as far to say we could do without the rep." (Big Local chair)

Yet there may also come a point in the programme when reps will be needed more frequently again. A worker commented:

> "The reps have done a lot of things so far, in the beginning. Now we are delivering it seems done, smaller. But I see it getting bigger again when we stop having paid staff."

A similar point was also made in the rep focus groups, and it was felt the need for the role had not disappeared. One rep said:

> "I'm kind of twitchy about having a conversation about the role of the rep because there's almost an assumption there that the reps have done their job."

There was also concern expressed in the Local Trust staff focus group that the skills needed at this middle stage in the programme may not be the ones required at the start of the programme when reps were originally recruited. This also made it difficult to properly assess performance across the existing rep pool, as one Local Trust staff member noted:

> "We don't necessarily have the evidence base about their performance [and] we have areas who don't want change because there is the risk of upsetting them if we move on a rep that has been there four years."

There was also the question about whether the focus of the rep role, particularly in relation to legacy and the eventual closure of the programme, would change in later stages, with a greater emphasis on activities such as reviewing, legacy, and evaluation.[8] A staff member said that:

8 Indeed, from 2019, after this research was carried out, there was a much greater focus on legacy in Local Trust with implications for the reps' role. From September 2019 any new Big Local Plan was required to include a legacy statement.

"…the nature of that conversation has changed from challenging them to engage more people to challenging them to think about legacy or if they are planning a large investment, asking the right questions. But I think that advice, that support, that networking or bridge building [still] needs to happen but the focus of it will be different."

"The same support an area needs when it is grappling with lots of stuff [in set up and delivery] is not the same it needs when it is legacy planning…. And it would be unsurprising if the rep role wasn't slightly different."

In terms of legacy planning, it is worth noting that across Big Local as a whole, although a handful of areas will spend out between 2018-2020, most areas have a great deal of money left and plenty of time remaining as of early 2018. The case-study areas were all at different stages in terms of how much they had delivered so far. Two of the areas were slower spenders, and legacy planning was less of an issue for them now. In other areas there had been varying levels of discussions about legacy, without many clear conclusions at this stage. The reps' roles in this process had varied greatly. In some they had instigated the issue, in others they had facilitated discussions on the subject at the request of the partnership. In one case it was a visiting rep, there to discuss their plan, who had raised the matter. Two of the areas were actively thinking about legacy organisations, and both of these were also to due to become LTOs during the course of the programme.

Face-to-face support[9]

The frequency with which reps currently visited the case-study areas varied between every month to once a quarter. This was usually tied to attending the partnership meeting. They would visit at other times for various reasons – including plan development, partnership away days, a dispute – although this was rarer. Contact and communication with reps outside of partnership meetings was usually by email or phone, and mainly with the chair and worker.

Face to face contact with the rep was continued to be seen as important in case-study areas for a number of reasons.

Firstly, it is easier (and sometimes more appropriate) to solve problems and discuss issues in person, as opposed to by email and phone. The importance of being able to read body language and challenges with large scale phone telephone conferences, were also cited. A worker said:

"Sometimes I think it is easier to talk to people face to face because you can't articulate what it is you are trying to say in an email… It's much easier if everyone is hearing the same stuff at the same time from the same person, rather than one person having a phone call, interpreting that and feeding it back."

9 This report was written prior to many more people becoming familiar with Zoom, and other video conferencing platforms, largely as a result of social distancing regulations in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Face-to-face support also **allows a more expansive conversation**, enabling them to access their knowledge, get advice and an opportunity to talk about other things.

It also helps t**o build relationships** between reps and the partnership, as a group. This can make the reps feel involved and in some cases the rep was seen as part of the team. Another benefit is having someone there to **reassure the partnership**, and alert them to other options and possibilities.

It also provides **a voice from outside the community** at meetings when there are difficulties who have no vested interests in community.

Like the role of the rep in general, the case-study areas often felt the level of contact needed was often less frequent and linked to the stage of Big Local in the areas. A Big Local chair said:

> "We have the workers in place, there's more people on the board, more people involved plus the LTO support. So at this stage [face to face support from the rep] is less of a need."

Yet while it was often felt there was perhaps less of a need for frequent face to face support, it was still seen as being important. A key indication of the importance of frequent rep contact is attendance at partnership meetings. A worker commented:

> " We much prefer it when we get the rep down here. We all get twitchy if she has missed a couple of meetings… So while we don't need to see her every week, seeing her every now and then is really invaluable."

In another area they rescheduled partnership meetings in order to enable the rep to attend because another of his Big Local areas had changed the date of theirs.

Future of the rep role

The research then focused on the question of what the essential aspects of the role are that need to be retained. The staff focus group highlighted the following key elements of the rep role that would continue to be needed.

> "There are questions about the role. Some of it does need to continue to exist, so: keeping eye on funding for us, letting us know if there are any reputational or financial risks that are about to happen because something has happened with the work or the partnership chair, and communicating changes to the programme [to the partnership]." (Local Trust member of staff)

Across the case-study areas there was a general desire for the role of the rep to be maintained. The reasons for this tended to fall into two main areas**:**

1: Maintaining a link with Local Trust and the broader Big Local programme

Similarly, to Local Trust staff, the case-study areas saw the rep as important in order to maintain a link with Local Trust to keep the areas updated about Local Trust and Big Local. This included new rules and regulations and linking to other areas' ideas and experiences. A worker commented:

> " What we do need is that link to Local Trust – 'What are we allowed to do?'. Even if the reps could do something more or different, that is still what we would be asking our rep for. I think we would still need that link between us and Local Trust."

2: Having a figure on the ground from outside the area

Reps continue to be an outside figure, mediating in (low level) conflict and providing a perspective without a vested interest. One worker said:

> "If you took [the rep] out of the equation those louder voices [in the partnership] might get heard a lot more around the table." (Worker for a Big Local area)

A chair also commented:

> "The local rep gives that kind of clarity sometimes, even though the Big Local is led by the residents, it is good to have the rep here… He really is quite impartial…"

Reps' view on the role going forward

The reps were asked about possible changes they would make to the rep role. This was quite an open exercise, and many ideas were generated. Some are listed below.

More joined-up working between reps

Reps could feel isolated and in the need of peer support and want people to bounce ideas off. Suggestions included:

- **regional clusters:** there were different levels of this, from developing networks of reps to having regional 'pools', a collection of reps where any one of them might visit a nearby Big Local area
- **pairing and buddying:** other reps coming into an area alongside the existing rep, to provide "a different pair of eyes"
- **sharing learning:** reps share their learning with other reps

Utilising the specialist skills of reps

The reps spoke of the rep pool having a 'rich tapestry' of skills, and discussed ways of utilising these:

- **Register of reps' skills:** have a register of reps' specialised skills
- *Specialisms:* the specialisms might include conflict, legacy, social investment, and green spaces
- **Targeted support:** areas go to another rep with a specific specialism
- **Moving reps:** on to other areas – change versus continuity
- There was some debate around whether it would benefit areas to move reps onto different areas.
- **Continuity:** Some reps see personal relationships (of rep and partnership) as important for stability by some reps
- **Change:** other reps wondered whether the relationship goes 'stale' and/or areas become too dependent on a particular rep if there was no change

Guiding the areas to think ahead

This was already a key part of the role, which was likely to increase in importance.

- **Seeing the bigger picture:** this has related to plans previously (looking beyond the current plan), but is now about legacy

While specialist skills dominated some discussions, others challenged whether this was part of the rep role.

Discussion: The rep role going forwards

Different stakeholders emphasised the relevance of core parts of the rep role going forwards. Having someone on the ground appears to remain important for the Big Local programme, both to maintain the flow of information to Local Trust, including on spend, progress and potential risks; and the information flow in the other direction, for the latest developments from Local Trust to be fed back to partnerships. Face to face contact was a key feature of this. As well as the link to Local Trust, the case-study areas valued having someone from outside the area.

There seemed to be a broad consensus that while core duties of the role need to be maintained, the focus might change, for example needing to look at legacy, whereas in the past the focus would have been on (for example) engaging people in the partnership. The case-study areas tended to conceptualise all future support to be delivered by the rep, usually the same person. There was little consideration of what alternative provision might look like. Reps spoke a great deal about specialist skills, but how these would fit with the current rep assignment was unclear. The current rep assignment states:

> "The emphasis should be on building the skills and confidence of residents to manage Big Local themselves by advising and facilitating, **rather than undertaking the delivery of Big Local activities on the area's behalf.**" (emphasis added)

Conclusion

The following conclusions can be drawn about which elements of the rep role are most valued, which of these are important to maintain going forwards, and how the rep role might be enhanced.

The research found that reps' tasks as delivered fall broadly in line with the assignment, although the consistency and quality of aspects of that delivery was questioned by Local Trust staff. Whilst the level of rep activity related to delivering these sometimes seemed to lessen post set up and, in certain cases, post a period of conflict and/or employment of workers, the basic functions of the rep role remains valued by areas, and will presumably be needed throughout the programme.

The role of the rep going forwards

The most valued elements of the role identified by the case-study areas *going forwards* are the regular support to partnerships, providing a link to Local Trust and giving partnerships an 'outside' view. Local Trust staff also valued having a direct contact in areas, but also emphasised the importance of information flowing the other way – reps reporting to Local Trust, keeping financial records, undertaking quality assurance etc.

In order to maintain and/or improve the main functions currently part of the rep role, the following points are important.

Face to face contact with areas

A regular contact person is valued, which includes some face to face contact. Whilst most contact in areas with reps was conducted by phone and email, these were often built around relationships developed and maintained by reps' physical presence at partnership meetings, which they attended every two months on average.

Low-level conflict resolution

By attending partnership meetings reps can also mediate if tensions have arisen and help to enable decision making for the whole group. This also enables them to 'take the pulse of the situation' for Local Trust. Having regular, face to face support with areas can also help identify arising issues and conflict and deal with them early on, rather than having them escalate and needing to step in then. However, whilst there are procedures and support for dealing with major conflict, more low-level conflict can be time consuming for the rep and disruptive to the progress of partnership.

Staying on top of Local Trust guidance and communications

The reps were seen by the case-study areas as a vital link to Local Trust and as the 'go to' people for advice on guidelines, rules and regulations. It is important that reps stay on top of guidance, especially with recent changes, so that they are in the best position to carry out this function. This was highlighted as an issue by Local Trust, for example reps sometimes appearing not to keep on top of programme announcements or Local Trust guidance.

Management of reps and themes for further exploration

The complexities of the context in which the rep role is situated were notable and reps being able to consistently engage with Big Local could be an issue. The assignment is the same in each area, but the demands they may face can vary between different areas at different times. Taking this into account, the following points are important to consider in terms of area distribution between reps and the management of reps.

Variation between areas

The evidence points to different needs in Big Local areas and some being more demanding in terms of support needs. However, the issues may be deeper rooted than just having more rep time or indeed a different rep. The support needs of these areas may be beyond the current rep and support offer. For example, engaging people in Big Local was highlighted as still being a challenge in many case-study areas and the reps' ability to help with this, beyond the assisting the initial set up of the partnership, was often limited.

Optimal number of areas

One way the variation between demands in areas was dealt with by some reps was balancing workloads between areas. There was a great deal of discussion between reps about how more demanding areas could be offset against less demanding areas if they had three or four areas in total. From the perspective of Local Trust staff, there was also a related concern that there is perhaps little incentive for reps who have one or two areas, which represented in practice only a small fraction of their overall portfolio of work, to immerse themselves in Big Local guidance, support offers and opportunities for their areas or to participate routinely in communications with other reps or Local Trust (including through the new Workplace platform). Nor may they have as much time to get a feel for what is happening in other areas. This does not reflect on the performance of reps who currently only have one or two areas. Many seem to go out of their way to read and understand guidance and support and find out about other areas and network with other reps, and this shows a huge amount of good will. But whether Local Trust should expect this level of investment from reps given the terms of their contracts is open to question.

Management of the rep pool

The reps, although contracted to Local Trust, are managed by a third party.[10] This can affect the personal relationship building between Local Trust staff and reps that can be an important part of maintaining the 'Big Local family'. Periodic 'reps' days' alone may not be sufficient to maintain this link. There was a perception amongst Local Trust staff that a small number of reps had become disengaged. The third-party management of reps also introduces the potential for confusion unless Local Trust's and the third party's thinking are completely aligned, and reps are clear who they need to contact about various issues.

10 This is no longer the case at time of publication.

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
Registered in England and Wales Charity number 1147511
Company number 07833396

DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.29840606

COMMUNITY FUND

www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk