
Volunteering in Big Local: Scoping paper

A version of this paper was published internally by Local Trust in May 2021. 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 been 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

Volunteers play an important role in communities and civil society delivering services and creating better connected and more resourceful communities. But while volunteers' contribution to their community is often spoken about, especially recently in response to the pandemic, most research around volunteering focuses on the individual, rather than the collective. Looking specifically to the Big Local programme, the collective outcomes of what happens when community-led volunteering opportunities are created in disadvantaged communities are particularly interesting.

Volunteers across the 150 Big Local areas play a massive role in delivering the programme on the ground. While Local Trust has a considerable amount of data on partnership members¹, there hasn't been much focus on volunteers outside of the partnership. This group of volunteers is particularly interesting because they are residents of communities which may not have a history of strong social infrastructure and therefore may not have had a strong culture of volunteering prior to the programme (Local Trust, 2019). The management of these volunteers is also of note because the roles are created through a community-led group which is different to other formal volunteering roles managed by volunteering centres or other charities.

This paper is the beginning of an exploration into volunteers who are not members of Big Local partnerships. The questions it seeks to answer are:

- What are the roles that volunteers take on in Big Local areas?
- What are the opportunities and challenges around volunteering in Big Local areas?
- What happens to communities when more people volunteer?

This is a scoping paper to understand what we know about volunteers outside of the partnership so that Local Trust can identify potential areas of research around this topic. Answering these questions around volunteering will build our evidence base of the legacy of Big Local and how the programme will leave behind a network of committed volunteers

across 150 communities. It also will strengthen our understanding of how Big Local has built resourcefulness to face crises.

Defining volunteering in Big Local

Before jumping into discussions around volunteering, it is important to clarify exactly what the term means in the context of this paper. Ellis Paine et al. (2010, p.8) provide three core elements in which volunteering is defined – that it is ‘unpaid, undertaken as an act of free will and of benefit to others’ This is a good definition as it is simple and captures the breadth of volunteering activities across Big Local areas.

For the purposes of the paper, the term ‘volunteer’ will be specifically used to identify people that give their time freely, of their own free will and for the benefit of others to Big Local activities but are not partnership members. This is of course not to diminish the work that partnership members do as volunteers but is for simplicity.

What are the roles that volunteers take on in Big Local areas?

Local Trust hasn’t previously looked specifically at volunteers outside the partnership in much detail, so it’s important to understand what they actually do. In order to understand this, the most recent Big Local plans and plan reviews for each area were searched to capture when the term ‘volunteer’ was mentioned. This provided a rich data source that could then be categorised into the types of roles that volunteers take on.

The volunteer roles in Big Local areas largely fall into six categories:

- **Environmental work:** there are several areas that rely on volunteers for environmental work, including litter picks and gardening groups. This is a very visible form of volunteering, and many areas have groups of people that volunteer regularly to support environmental projects.
- **Working in community hubs:** areas that own or use a community hub have volunteers that help run or manage them. Some areas fully rely on volunteers to manage the upkeep and hiring of hubs, while others may have workers that take on the overall management and use volunteers to support them.
- **Running activities and clubs:** Big Local areas run a number of activities and clubs, such as job clubs, craft clubs, knitting clubs and youth clubs, which are often run or supported by volunteers.
- **Organising or supporting community events:** community events are an important way to engage and consult with the local community and are something those Big Local areas have prioritised since the beginning of the programme. Many community events across the areas rely on volunteers to support and organise them.
- **Sub-groups or working groups:** some partnerships choose to distribute decision-making to sub-groups that are focused on a particular topic or priority.
- **Helping neighbours:** the most informal voluntary activity where people wouldn’t see themselves as volunteering.

This is a very cursory overview of the roles that volunteers take on and there is still further unpacking needed to understand who these volunteers are, how they take on these roles, how they are managed and how they may take on multiple roles and move between roles. Volunteering in Big Local isn’t cut and dried, reviews of Big Local plans mentioned instances where beneficiaries moved into volunteering roles, for instance, at youth clubs or

running “knit and natter” sessions for older people. Because Big Local areas deliver so many services and activities, it is important to keep this nuanced nature of volunteering in mind.

While plans and plan reviews discussed the volunteering roles created through Big Local work, there are also cases where partnerships facilitate the creation of volunteering opportunities that aren’t directly linked to Big Local. For example, the Good Neighbours Initiative in East Cleveland Villages is a community group made up of a number of volunteers that support people in need of a helping hand. The group was developed in response to COVID-19 and has created a large network of volunteers. The group started independently of East Cleveland Villages Big Local but drew on the Big Local’s networks and also received Big Local funding. This facilitation of volunteer groups that will, hopefully, last beyond the programme are important legacies that will be left behind as a result of Big Local.

Volunteering outside of the partnership also seems to be an effective way to engage and work with young people. Partnerships are often made up of older volunteers and as of 2020, only 5% of partnership members were under 29 (Local Trust, 2020). Plans and plan reviews touched on how important volunteers were to the delivery of youth clubs. Many also spoke about how people that participated in youth clubs went on to volunteer for the clubs as they got older. Researching how young people engage with the programme is of particular interest to Local Trust and could be further explored through additional volunteering research.

Volunteers take on a number of different roles in Big Local areas around projects and activities. They are crucial to the delivery of Big Local and are relied upon to manage community hubs, which is a massive undertaking and demonstrates volunteers’ commitment to Big Local and their community. They may also be involved in distributed decision-making and have influence over Big Local resources as sub-group members. The extent to which volunteers have decision-making power isn’t known currently but has implications for how entrenched community-led work is in Big Local areas and should be explored further.

What are the opportunities and challenges around volunteering in Big Local?

In addition to the types of roles that volunteers take on, Big Local plans and plan reviews highlighted some key opportunities and challenges around volunteering. The first being areas’ commitment to providing training to volunteers. Previous research on Big Local engagement found that areas used the combination of training and volunteering opportunities to “build confidence and strengthen CV’s” (Curtis et al., 2016, 23). Skills development and job opportunities are particularly important to Big Local areas, most likely because they are often deprived areas that lack a strong job market. Big Local plans and plan reviews demonstrated areas’ commitment to providing training to volunteers, such as first aid and hygiene training, and training for people to lead activities such as football coaching or chair exercise sessions.

Volunteering roles also create spaces for residents who may not feel confident enough to join the partnership to give their time. Having roles that residents can take on in a more ad hoc manner, such as event organising, or focused on a specific interest, such as gardening, can be an effective way to bring in more residents and engage them in community-led volunteering work. This reflects findings from Pathways Through Participation that found “levels of intensity and frequency of people’s participation fluctuated depending on what was happening in their lives” (Brodie, 2011, 30). Having roles that vary in frequency and time commitment is important to allowing more residents to engage in volunteering, and this reflects the different types of roles available in Big Local areas.

Whilst volunteering may provide opportunities for people who do not want to join a partnership to engage in Big Local work, it can be hard to reach beyond people's networks to engage new volunteers. Ellis Paine (2015) notes that the most effective way of recruiting volunteers is by being asked, which has implications for the diversity of people that are likely to be involved. Further research could explore the demographics of volunteers to understand how they compare to partnership members and test if Big Local areas are able to engage a more diverse group of residents through volunteering.

Many plan reviews raised challenges around the recruitment of volunteers. They mentioned that Big Local work often relies on a small group of volunteers (which includes both partnership members and non-members). This is often referred to the civic core, "a relatively small group of particularly committed individuals [that are] responsible for a majority of the most visible forms of volunteering within communities across the country" (Ellis Paine, 2015, p.8). While this may be a common issue faced across the country, it raises particular challenges for Big Local areas around succession planning. Our Bigger Story's *Building on Local* highlights how some partnership members that are getting older or have been involved for several years would now like to take a step back, but "there seems to be a lack of people coming up as potential replacements" (McCabe et al., 2021, p.19). A lack of partnership members and volunteers to deliver Big Local could slow momentum, therefore risking not just delivery of the Big Local programme but the legacy of areas. Hopefully the new volunteers that have come forward as a result of the pandemic can be brought into more leadership roles.

The opportunities and challenges in relation to Big Local volunteers raise interesting questions that could be explored in more detail. Exploring plan reviews and plans uncovers how volunteering provides increased skills and confidence for those that give their time, and that Big Local partnerships recognise this by investing in training for volunteers.

What happens to communities when more people volunteer?

Big Local areas were chosen because they lacked social infrastructure to apply for lottery funding and therefore had not received their fair share of funding. The programme seeks to address this by building capacity of residents and is reflected in our hypothesis that *long term funding and support to build capacity gives residents in hyper-local areas agency to take decisions and to act to create positive and lasting change*. What does this look like in practice with regards to more people volunteering in Big Local areas?

The concept of 'thick volunteering' is useful to bring into this discussion and help unpacking what volunteering in Big Local areas looks like. O'Toole defines thick volunteering as a form of volunteering that is "rich in quality, heavily saturated with social and individual meaning, and having a depth to that meaning" (2016, p.9). This type of volunteering helps draw out the interconnectedness that Big Local volunteers experience as residents and volunteers, and sometimes beneficiaries, which is poignantly summed up by Ellis-Paine:

Communities are more than just part of the context within which volunteering takes place: they are sources of identity and meaning for residents. They shape all stages of the volunteering process and are shaped by it. (2015, p.6)

Place holds meaning for residents and the concept of thick volunteering helps frame how volunteers working to improve the areas where they themselves live holds special meaning for them. This is no doubt why partnership members feel so passionate about the work they

do, mainly because they are in control of the Big Local funding and see the impact that it's making in their community. As research on volunteers progresses, it will be interesting to explore if volunteers have the same attitude.

Pathways Through Participation states that interviewees "reported new friendships, a more improved sense of community... and more positive sense of self-worth and identity" because of their participation (Brodie, 2011, 31). These impacts indicate that volunteers' networks have increased, and they feel more connected with their community, which both strongly align with the Big Local hypothesis. Research into Big Local has found that while partnership members feel a strong connection to their community and agency in their decision-making, this may be more difficult to pass on to the wider community because learning and skills often stays within the partnership and shared more widely (McCabe et. al, 2021).

It is useful to bring in the concept of thick volunteering in terms of Big Local because of the deep connections that volunteers can have with the community they live in. It demonstrates the passion that partnership members have for Big Local and how they feel about making a difference in their area. There are outcomes that can be felt by people when they begin to give their time, such as an improved sense of community and sense of identity that really relate back to this concept of thick volunteering, but there is more research needed to understand how this applies to Big Local areas. Unpacking what happens when more people volunteer in the communities that they live in feels like a very important question that needs additional research, particularly around the extent to which Big Local makes a difference to residents outside of the partnership.

Conclusion

The pandemic has demonstrated people's willingness to help out and volunteer with Big Local. Partnerships have "capitalised on the upsurge of community spirit and new volunteers coming forward during the pandemic" (McCabe et al., 2021, p.10). But who are these volunteers and what are they doing? This paper has provided insight into the roles that volunteers take on, they do environmental work, manage community hubs, run activities and clubs, organise, or support community events and sit on sub-groups or working groups. Volunteers don't just take on one role for a set period of time, they may move between roles or in and out of volunteering. Research to date has not explored who the volunteers are and how they differ from partnership members in terms of demographics. Having different types of roles that volunteers can take on allows for a range of people to get involved in Big Local depending on their interests and time they are able to give.

Many partnerships identify issues around volunteer recruitment, and this can have longer term impacts around succession planning for partnership members that may be planning to step down. Understanding who gets involved and how can help shape guidance to areas around engagement and provide greater insight into recruiting and maintaining volunteers. More positively, volunteering provides opportunities for young people to get involved in Big Local activities and can possibly lead them into more formal volunteering roles in the future and ensure that the culture of volunteering continues after Big Local.

Exploring the more community wide outcomes of volunteering really relates back to the Big Local hypothesis and what happens when residents are given power to decide how to improve their community. To date, most research centres around partnership members but widening this out to volunteers will give important insight into how the programme impacts people beyond the small number of partnership members. Thinking about the context that people give their time and how it affects the community has a whole is a gap that has been identified in other research so will not only support the work that Local Trust does, but also provide new insight into volunteering research.

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