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Pushing the boundaries of Big Local

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Introduction

Big Local provides local areas with funding to support resident-led solutions to create lasting change. Starting in 2010, The National Lottery Community Fund (then called The Big Lottery Fund), identified areas that have since been described as 'left-behind' — areas that had been previously overlooked for funding and investment. In choosing the areas, consideration was also given to geographical spread across England and factors such as deprivation levels and resident populations. By 2012, 150 areas had been chosen and allocated £1m each of Big Local funding. This paper reports on research looking at boundaries in Big Local including fieldwork in three Big Local areas where issues relating to boundaries have arisen.

The aim of Big Local is to support residents to improve where they live through resident-led initiatives by building the capacity of residents to take charge of their own future, to speak for themselves, and to build social capital and connections within the community. The approach is underpinned by a belief that 'place' matters in strengthening local communities and in turn creates the 'social capital' that is needed for a thriving civil society.¹ It is a belief that has been gaining traction in one form or another for some decades, popularised by American academic Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone*² in which he identified declining local associational life – fewer clubs and associations, less neighbourliness, low voter turnout, declining church attendances – as a threat to civil society. While not coining the term 'social capital', Putnam's promotion of it has led to a greater understanding that social capital is a

pre-requisite for a well functioning society. The checks and balances of a healthily functioning state require civil society structures in the form of grassroots activism, volunteering, pressure groups and voters, while private enterprise and a successful economy cannot thrive without structures that create and enhance human capital.

In the UK, successive governments have tried to re-build social capital in marginalised communities through place-based programmes such as the Single Regeneration Budget, New Deal for Communities, Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, Sure Start. These initiatives have been what can be termed 'top-down' – designed by governments and delivered by organisations and agencies with a focus on physical environment, economics and the labour market. While sharing objectives of social capital building, Big Local differs by being a 'bottom-up' development

programme typified as resident-led, with more attention to social objectives.³ An area is viewed not so much as a target population for the purpose of measuring the impact of an objective, but as a setting for collaboration, collective learning and, from the ground, making changes to larger-scale systems. Yet it might be viewed as a risky, and mainly untested strategy on this scale and one with many challenges.

In this paper we examine the challenges that have been faced by some Big Local areas, focusing on how the boundaries created for Big Local, alongside the pre-existing boundaries within and across Big Local areas, have influenced the development of the programme locally. We identify a number of themes and assess how boundaries challenge the work of Big Local and how Big Local partnerships have approached overcoming or countering their effects.

The boundaries of local participation



Funding place-based approaches will always to some extent be a leap of faith.”⁴

When visiting more than one Big Local area it immediately becomes apparent that there is no one template for Big Local. There is an ideal development model that starts with local people getting involved, forming a partnership led by residents, developing and agreeing a plan, and delivering and reviewing it over time. But the flexibility that each Big Local has to spend their funding on local priorities inevitably results in partnerships developing in very different ways. Big Local looks different in each of the 150 places involved because every Big Local area has a unique set of pre-existing dynamics.

It is an approach that can be viewed as ‘situated practice’ where the realisation of inclusive, active citizenship requires a deeper understanding of the local politics of participation with reference to the local social, cultural, historical and political context.⁵ While the flexibility of the Big Local approach should be ideally suited to accommodating these attributes, sometimes the pre-existing internal and external boundaries – and the artificial boundaries created by the process of defining a Big Local area – can be challenging.

Physical boundaries

Big Local is, at its heart, a programme that has set out to focus on disadvantaged 'communities of place'.⁶ But as a place-based programme, at some point the extent of 'place' needs defining. Decisions about the boundaries of each Big Local area were based on evidence about areas that had been previously overlooked for funding and investment, ensuring a broad spread of Big Local areas across different regions of England, and factors such as population and deprivation levels.⁷ Boundaries were drawn on maps that in many cases used actual or combinations of existing units (such as parish boundaries, council wards). People living within the boundary were a part of Big Local. Those outside were, generally, not. The programme defines the physical boundaries of an area and therefore, by default, also defines the social boundaries. While, in some cases, these were contiguous, in others they brought together previously disparate sub-communities.⁸

With every Big Local boundary inevitably having different characteristics, the effects of geography on patterns of participation and programme development vary accordingly.

In one Big Local we visited, a very busy, six-lane road ran across the area. On one side of the road were 3,000 homes in a large post-war social-housing estate.

On the other side were 600 mainly privately-owned houses. The road itself formed a highly significant physical barrier to participation with unlit underpasses the only way for residents to traverse the area on foot. Yet, while residents on both sides of the road cited it as a dividing line, further discussion highlighted that the social boundaries between residents were more fundamental. The story we heard of the Big Local partnership was one of disharmony and conflict. Residents from one side of the road complained that they had been purposefully excluded from the initial Big Local planning and development, not helped by the programme initially being named after the estate on the other side of the road. They therefore disrupted the work of the Big Local partnership. While this might be seen as valuable empowerment of residents, harnessing their energy towards a collective goal, it was damaging for the programme as a whole. Only through the appointment of an experienced and skilled community worker has the programme eventually been able to move forward. The worker has focused on listening to the dissident residents, translating their concerns to residents of the other area and developing a number of bonding activities based on shared interests, and ensuring representation on the partnership. Yet it is an uneasy truce, and while the community worker has made great inroads, residents from

the minority community said that they only engaged with Big Local to ensure that they received the proportion of the funding that they felt 'entitled to'.

In another case we saw that a Big Local boundary drawn around three separate villages had defined how the partnership developed. With additional social and economic differences between the villages, the geographical boundaries reflected a strong pre-existing sense of separate identity and belonging. Each village had its own history and sense of place, and there was no previous experience of working together. In recognition of these dynamics the initial partnership reserved places for residents of each village, appointed joint chairs and attempted to develop a plan for the area as a whole. However, residents from the villages had very different views about what Big Local could and should do for them, resulting in the early days of the partnership being defined by tensions and conflict. As a result, only residents from one of the villages have consistently taken up their allocation of partnership places. People from the other villages are perceived as only coming to the table '*...when they want some money*'. Despite what might be seen as failure in consensus-building, the Big Local

partnership has tried to be very even-handed, allocating funding equally across the three communities and focusing much of their efforts on large annual events that attract residents from the three villages. We see, therefore, that while there has been limited success in bonding between residents in the villages, the events provide a bridging platform between them. Unlike the previous case, in this area the partnership has not employed a project worker and although they received significant input from the Big Local rep, a dedicated arbiter on the ground may have helped solve some of the ongoing problems.

Tensions such as these can be observed to have slowed the pace of development of Big Local programmes as partnerships have taken more time to become established, side-tracked and in some cases bogged-down in conflict. Developing a shared vision in areas where the physical boundaries cut across or combine pre-existing communities of shared interest can be seen to have been a longer, more challenging process. While Big Local may encourage residents to consider how they perceive and engage within physical boundaries, they cannot be compelled to take part in collective action.

Emotional boundaries

As individuals we are all, to some extent, embedded in place and where we live is often important in how we define ourselves and how we interact with others. Understanding the dynamics of how people are attached to place can help us to understand how particular preferences, perceptions and emotional connections to place relate to community social cohesion, organised participation and community development.⁹ In the context of Big Local, if local people are attached to a place, they will be better able to come together, identify local needs and take action in response to them. In cases where neighbours are anonymous and do not stay long enough to develop any emotional connection to place, they are less likely to be committed enough to improve their own home, or to work with their neighbours and local groups to improve the whole neighbourhood.

We certainly found this to be the case in one Big Local area on the edge of a big city where the presence of a large stock of social housing has led to a high turnover of residents. Many had been re-housed from other parts of the country and few had previous connections with the area. Some we spoke to said that they were not there by choice.



I'd go – there's no way I'd stay here if I had the money."

As has been highlighted in other research,¹⁰ transience can be a barrier to developing

cohesion through the development of relationships that might engender a strong sense of community. In the same area we found a core of long-term residents who told us that while they identified strongly with the place, their sense of belonging was no longer translated into formal community groups and associations. They also said that religious and ethnic differences between themselves and newer residents created division.

With an awareness of these issues, the Big Local partnership was trying to be inclusive both in terms of its own membership, and in funding multi-cultural and multi-faith activities and events. Big Local was also funding a parent and toddler group where a number of parents recently arrived in the area were able to bond around the needs of their children.

In places with less transience, people can have incredibly strong bonds to the physical environment which in turn can shape their identity and values and impact on their engagement within the place. In some cases, maintaining things that are important to people, or focusing on the past through heritage activity mobilises by exploiting people's emotional connection to place. We heard how in one Big Local area large numbers of residents were involved in volunteering at a re-enactment which celebrated the history of the wider area, while in another, Big Local was recognising the local industrial heritage by commissioning a memorial to miners who had died in accidents underground. Place

attachment can also be a phenomenon that can set the past aside, driving people to work individually or collectively to radically change their local area.

For a place-based programme seeking to drive change, such as Big Local, these levels of place attachment¹¹ would seem to be an important success factor. We observed how, when physical boundaries are coterminous with existing social groupings, smoother programme development resulted. With pre-existing

local identities, participation and engagement, local residents were better placed to identify local needs and take action in response. Where boundaries encompassed a number of disparate sub-groups, the lack of shared experience, sense of place and history of working together made things more difficult. That is not to say however, that disparate sub-groups within an area cannot work together and we observed how Big Local funding provides a powerful incentive for them to do so.

Social and economic boundaries

Previous research¹² and other studies of Big Local¹³ identify social class, housing, ethnicity, economic resources and other factors as structural boundaries in Big Local areas. These are found to work against the social capital required for residents to come together in common purpose. They are related to feelings of place attachment which, when present, form 'bridging' social capital that can overcome residents' social and economic differences. In areas with low levels of attachment and significant social or economic differences between groups of residents, we observed how different approaches were required to build the bonding social capital through, for example, hosting activities to bring disparate individuals and groups together and through engagement to slowly build the trust that is the foundation of social capital. We heard how the time taken for this to happen in a number of Big Local areas was measured in years rather than weeks or months, and in one case at least,

had never really happened at all. This was the case in the three villages mentioned previously, where geographically, demographically and socially separate sub-communities found it impossible to work together in partnership. That is not to say however, the programme has not made a difference. Residents from all three villages have been supported through valuable apprenticeships; capital grants have been given to each village's primary schools; while festivals and annual events supported by Big Local have gone some way to bring together some of the residents on a regular basis. Nonetheless, in equipping local people with increased skills and confidence that enables them to better meet local needs going forward, on present evidence it is likely that the residents of one village will gain far more than the residents of the others.

Boundaries of influence

The amount of influence that local residents have in their area can be seen to have an impact on the formation and function of programmes such as Big Local and can be seen to operate on two levels.

For individuals, the extent to which they feel that they have influence within local groups, that they matter to the group, and that the group matters to its members has been shown to be an important factor in building a sense of community.¹⁴ Meanwhile, groups made up of local members often act as intermediaries between communities and the wider world by increasing influence and encouraging participation. This leads to greater sharing of power and greater community 'ownership'. Conversely, in areas where influence has been drawn away from a locality through the decline of local associations the integration and cohesion of communities can be threatened.¹⁵ The process of Big Local development reflects this dynamic with the partnership leading collective action that can cause the wider environment to be more responsive to the needs of residents. Yet, we saw how this is inevitably easier and more effective in places with a history of self-organising, pre-existing voluntary groups, community structures and power sharing with outside agencies.

Influence was at the heart of the problems faced by one Big Local that we visited. We were told of a history of top-down community development initiatives and regeneration schemes delivered by outside agencies that had been over-protective

of residents, leaving them disenfranchised and unable to take the self-determining opportunity presented by Big Local. We were told how, at first, the Big Local partnership was dominated by agencies rather than residents. This was set within the context of what was described as a very paternalistic attitude by local state and economic organisations and larger civil society players from outside of the area that were used to taking the lead on local decision making. We were told how the initial Big Local plan was 'cooked-up' by those with influence and power to serve external interests and agendas. Any residents involved at that stage were felt to be dependent and subservient to the local council.



Local people feel intimidated by councillors and don't feel they can say anything because they think they're higher than them."

The subsequent process of local residents re-gaining influence was difficult and led to conflict between residents and agencies, and between residents themselves.

Having been excluded from local decision making for so long, we heard that few residents had felt able to take responsibility

for developing and delivering Big Local. Eventually, with the appointment of a community worker and support from the Big Local rep we saw how this was changing and we heard of the growing confidence – and influence – of several partnership members. Yet it seems that a lack of recognition of these dynamics and community capacity issues in the early stages of the programme had resulted in a weak partnership that still often lacks the confidence to make decisions and consequently has limited influence with other local residents and with outside agencies. The hope going forwards, is that Big Local will provide a legacy of stronger local community groups who can take ownership, do things for themselves, but also not become isolationist, recognising

when partnership working is beneficial or necessary.

In other areas, we also saw how disparities in existing influence affected Big Local developments in other ways. The presence, or lack of existing community activism as represented by residents' committees or tenants' associations, local charities, churches, youth groups or other local interest groups was observed to be an important factor in how Big Local programmes developed. In areas with little pre-existing community action, opportunities for residents to have influence are limited. In such areas Big Local therefore has an enhanced and time-consuming role in the process of building the confidence of local residents.

Boundaries of power

As has been highlighted in other assessments of Big Local¹⁶, the boundaries of power can create a difficult relationship between residents and outside organisations. Boundaries are often defined by groups to protect themselves from outsiders and there is a risk that this leads to isolation. With some Big Local partnerships, the line drawn on the map defining their area also defines who and who is not eligible to participate in Big Local activities, eligible for Big Local funding and able to participate in Big Local decision-making. For some partnerships, this leads to strength and an accumulation of power that can be used to enable local residents to have greater influence. As illustrated in the previous section, in less confident groups it can lead to isolationism.

The relationship between Big Local partnerships and outside agencies can be presented as a continuum of power and control. At one end of the spectrum residents can be mere consultees as organisations implement a top-down approach delivered by outside agencies. At the other are groups of residents who believe that to deliver the programme they have to be in control and plan and organise everything themselves. At the centre is a balance of respect and mutual understanding with Big Local a part of wider networks that share co-identified goals.

Across all three areas we visited, we observed different interactions between residents and outside agencies where the history of relationships and administrative borders, shaped attitudes towards engagement.

In two Big Local areas we visited – both with sub-communities in conflict – what united residents was that being situated at the edge of their local authority area they felt variously “forgotten”, “left-behind” or “ignored”. Residents told us how services such as road maintenance, bin collections, or children’s playgrounds were better in neighbouring council areas, or that the residents of estates closer to the centres of power received ‘all the money’. This narrative was used to explain the lack of resources and support from the council for their Big Local programme. To varying extents, in both these areas, separating themselves as residents from outside agencies created a degree of bonding and unity of purpose.

 **I think the [Big Local] process is really good – to get local people involved – they know what’s needed rather than someone from the council.”**

Yet we also heard how in one area, after a period when the partnership had been operating in isolation, they could achieve

more for their area by engaging with outside organisations whose objectives aligned with their own. As a result, they are starting to work with a range of other bodies such as the NHS where supporting the mental health needs of local people is a shared priority.

The approach to networking and engagement in all three areas we visited had been shaped by previous experience of regeneration or community development programmes. Sure Start came in for a good deal of criticism as having invested heavily in both infrastructure and services for children and families, only for the community to be left feeling abandoned when policies changed and services were withdrawn. In degrees, we heard how, this has left both a mistrust of such initiatives, along with practical consequences of few remaining community-led associations supporting families in areas with high populations

of children. Community programmes like Sure Start that sought to impose external priorities on local areas have been described as promoting a deficit model where funding is used to tackle perceived inequalities¹⁷ – contrasting with Big Local, which aims to invest in local strengths and assets through empowering residents. Transferring control to communities however is easier said than done¹⁸ and, as has been noted in previous studies,¹⁹ ‘romanticising’ residents can perhaps be as disempowering in the long term as the failure to share power. Our discussions with residents suggest that they may know better than anyone what the problems are in their areas, but they don’t have all the answers and cannot be expected to. We observed how the change in approach has been challenging for both residents who were traditionally the recipients of top-down interventions, and for the organisations that previously delivered them.

Conclusion

Despite focusing on just three places, we've identified a number of issues that cut across Big Local areas. We also saw key differences in how Big Local partnerships attempted or succeeded in overcoming – or at least countering – boundary issues.

We observed that where the physical boundaries of Big Local seek to combine pre-existing settlements (housing estates or villages) the extent to which local people in the area had histories of collaboration, or had shared experiences, influenced how residents were able to engage with one another. This in turn had an impact on the length of time that it took functional partnerships to form and shared visions developed that could effect change. In one case where this process stalled because of conflict between local groups of residents, we heard how the impasse was overcome by employing an experienced community development practitioner who was able to act independently, bridging divides between residents and moving the programme forward.

While the physical boundaries were important in some areas, these were strongly related to emotional boundaries that can exist when people are embedded within a place, often described as a 'sense of belonging'. We saw how a sense of belonging or place attachment facilitates emotional safety and trust which in turn makes it more likely that people will invest and get involved in communal activity. In areas of high transience, we saw how Big Local partnerships needed to invest

far more in a diverse range of 'bridging' activities designed to bring people together, to engage residents before local needs and priorities could be accurately identified. Such events could be broad in their approach, such as community fairs or fun-days, while others could be targeted at smaller groups, such as the play sessions for young children that we heard about in one area held to engage transient young parents.

We saw how similar approaches were needed in areas where the differences in sub-groupings of residents were based on social, economic and demographic differences. If Big Local is to benefit the whole community then having a range of bridging (between groups) and bonding (within groups) activities is needed. Again, we saw how in different programmes this had been approached with activities that ranged from large-scale music festivals designed to bring all residents together just once a year, to a regular craft group funded by Big Local to engage with older people in one area.

A common observation across the programmes we visited was the importance of relationships – pre-existing and ongoing. All the areas we visited

had experience of previous regeneration initiatives which in many cases had not met local expectations especially around sustainability. While we did encounter some cynicism, most of the people we spoke to saw Big Local as an opportunity to do things differently and the length of time of the Big Local programme was seen to be particularly important in facilitating this. We also found that in some areas there had been difficult relationships with outside organisations as the boundaries of power and responsibility were not always clearly set out. Yet we heard how, slowly, external organisations were learning from Big Local and increasingly recognising and supporting communities to make decisions on their own.

What was striking in all the Big Local areas we visited was the length of time that it can take to embed Big Local – just to the point where enough residents are prepared to volunteer for the partnership itself – even as the programme clock ticks down. Previous research²⁰ has suggested that in areas with very low levels of pre-existing community engagement, substantial changes in participation and engagement through the building of social capital can take decades, consuming the Big Local timeframe. In such cases the focus

in Big Local of developing the skills and confidence of local people to continue to identify and respond, becomes even more critical.

In this report we have attempted to examine the role that boundaries have played to date in a number of Big Local partnerships. The small and purposeful sample means that the areas studied are not typical, and chosen because they all had a history of difficulties in their development which inevitably highlights challenges other programmes may not have faced. Yet our findings and conclusions are consistent with other reports, studies and evaluations of Big Local. We find that 'situatedness'²¹ affected ways in which programmes have developed as a result of the geographical, political, social, cultural and historical particularities of each area rather than an idealised notion of democratic practice embodied in the objective of resident empowerment. While it is almost inevitable that place-based funding programmes require boundaries to be drawn, appreciating the ways in which those boundaries inter-relate with the situatedness of the people living within them is important in understanding how programmes might develop, and through their life and beyond, how they can be modified to meet changing local objectives.

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