Local Trust | Big Local

Working on Big Local: a survey of paid workers

Summary

Background

Big Local is a volunteer, resident-led programme supporting 150 areas in England. The programme (funded by the National Lottery Community Fund) gives each area access to £1m and 10-15 years in which to spend it. The programme (run by Local Trust) puts decision-making in the hands of communities. While envisaged that resident volunteers would drive the programme, over time almost all Big Local areas have employed at least one worker and it has become clear that they play an important role in its day-to-day delivery. In 2018 Local Trust carried out an online survey of workers to learn more about them and what it is like to work on Big Local. This is a summary of the findings outlined in the full report *Working on Big Local: a survey of paid workers*.

Who are Big Local workers?

Big Local workers are: predominantly non-residents (73%), employees of an organisation (84%), female (72%), aged between 45 and 54 (54%), white (87%), with experience in carrying out similar work (73%) and educated to degree level (59%). Over a third (34%) are members of the Big Local partnership (the areas' decision-making group).

- *Resident workers: workers who are also residents in the Big Local area are **less likely** to have previous experience in a similar role or have a degree. However, they are **more likely** to have been involved in Big Local before becoming a worker through volunteering or being a member on the partnership. They are **more likely** to be a current member of a partnership.*

- *Community Development/Community Engagement (CD/CE) workers: When looking at workers who said they did CD/CE work, the majority do not have a community development qualification, are not residents in the area and are not members of the partnership. The majority were not previously involved in Big Local, but they are **more likely** to have previous experience in a similar role.*

- *Employees: When looking at workers who are employed as opposed to self-employed, they are **more likely** to be residents and have been in post for longer (a year or more). They are **more likely** to be female, but **less likely** to be from Black and Minority Ethnic groups.*

What do Big Local workers do?

Roles can be broadly grouped under three categories: supporting the Big Local partnership, networking and engaging the community, and supporting project delivery. The highest proportion of workers carry out CD/CE work.

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- **Majority of role involved:** 39% of workers said the majority of their role involved community development/engagement (CD/CE). 20% said 'administration', 15% 'delivering projects', and 13% 'management'.

- **Main tasks:** in relation to the main tasks performed in their role (multiple options could be selected), 86% of workers said they carry out work to 'support the Big Local partnership', 83% 'work face-to-face with the community' and 75% 'provide other support in the delivery of the Big Local plan'.

    - *Resident workers: resident workers are **less likely** to provide 'other support' to help the delivery of the Big Local plan, such as project management, evaluation and risk assessments than other workers.*

    - *CD/CE workers: CD/CE workers are **more likely** to carry out work that is face-to-face with the community than other workers. They are also **more likely** to 'provide other support' to help deliver the plan (e.g. project management, evaluation and risk assessments).*

Relationships and networks

Workers are connected and in regular contact with others, specifically members of the partnerships and residents in the community. There is little evidence to suggest they work in isolation with little involvement from or contact with others. However, they have little contact with workers in other Big Local areas.

- **Regular contact with others:** 86% have regular contact with Big Local chairs, 79% have regular contact with other members of the Big Local partnership, and 70% have regular contact with other residents outside of the Big Local partnership.

- **Contact with other workers:** although over 56% have regular contact with other workers in *their* own area, only 5% have regular contact with workers in *other* Big Local areas.

Almost all workers surveyed think they have a good working relationship with others, including local voluntary and community groups, residents and local government. They also have good working relationships with Big Local partnerships.

- **Good relationships with others:** 99% have a good relationship with local voluntary and community groups, 98% with their Big Local partnership, and 96% with residents in the community. Over 90% have good relationships with local authority officers and councillors.

How are workers supported?

The majority of workers receive some "formalised" support. The majority also feel they have the support and resources they need to do their job and feel supported by others. They know what is expected of them and are clear about their role and responsibilities. Nevertheless, almost half hadn't been on a course or received training recently. Further, almost half of workers with a line/contract manager do not have formal supervisions/contract review meetings with them.

- **Formal support**: the majority of workers have a line/contract manager (86%) and a workplan (80%). Just under three quarters also meet someone regularly to talk about their work and progress (74%). The majority feel they have the support and resources they need to do their job (85%). Only 53% received training (courses or on the job) in the previous 12 months.

- **Being supported by others:** 84% feel supported by the organisation that employs/contracts them, 89% feel supported by the Big Local chair, 79% by the partnership, and 78% by the Big Local rep (rep).

- **Clarity of role, responsibilities and expectations:** 93% know what is expected of them, 80% have clear targets and objectives, and 85% are clear about their role and responsibilities.

    - *Resident workers: residents are similar to other workers in relation to support. However, residents are **less likely** to have received training in the last 12 months than other workers.*

    - *CD/CE workers: CD/CE workers are **more likely** to receive specific support from their line/contract manager, such as feedback, recognition of good work and supervision meetings. They are also **less likely** to feel supported by the chair of the partnership.*

    - *Employees: employees are **more likely** to have a line/contract manager and to receive specific support from them, such as recognition of good work and feedback on performance. Employees are also **more likely** to have received training in the last 12 months. However, they are **less likely** to have clear targets and objectives and feel supported by the rep.*

What support do workers want?

We asked workers about the challenges they faced and what would help them to carry out their role. Responses to these open questions were coded and categorised into themes. The following are the *most common* themes to emerge, with examples. Unsurprisingly, suggestions made in relation to what would help them to carry out their role are closely related to their challenges.

What challenges do Big Local workers face?

- **Challenges relating to the Big Local partnership**: conflict on the partnership, difficult relationships between members, wanting members to be more “outward looking”, wanting more involvement and engagement from members, conflicts of interest on the group.
- **Engaging and outreach**: engaging residents in Big Local, getting more people involved in Big Local activities and attracting volunteers to Big Local.
- **Capacity and workload**: feeling that they don’t have enough time, working to tight project timelines, difficulty balancing projects and dealing with a high volume of work.

What would help Big Local workers to carry out their role?

- **Changes to the culture of the Big Local partnership**: more involvement from partnership members, a change in members thinking or approach, an improvement in relations between members.
- **Resources to carry out the role**: more people (either paid staff or volunteers) and more time to carry out their role.

- **Changes to their role/support**: Improved support structure (e.g. regular review meetings or a workplan), more clarification of their role.

Opportunities to support Big Local workers

There are potentially a number of ways in which workers could be supported to do their job. Based on responses and the overall themes identified, support for workers could be grouped as follows.

- **Direct support to workers:** examples of "direct" support could include facilitating greater networking between workers across areas through opportunities or events (these could help to build networks between them and encourage peer support).

- **Indirect support to workers through the Big Local partnership:** support here could include further support for partnerships around their ways of working, building positive relationships between members, understanding roles and responsibilities and how to engage others.

- **Indirect support to workers through the Locally Trusted Organisation (LTO):** this could include facilitating networking between LTOs to encourage peer support, as well as knowledge and resource sharing. This could also include building a closer relationship between Local Trust and LTOs, making sure they are aware of their role (and responsibilities) within the programme, and in relation to any workers paid to support the partnership.

Conclusion

Because of the survey, we now know more about the paid workers on Big Local: we know who they are, what they do, what their relationships are like and how they are supported. For the majority, the findings are positive, but the picture is not positive for all. There are areas where workers could be better supported. Almost a quarter don't meet with someone regularly to talk about their work, a fifth don't have a workplan and almost half have not received any training in the 12 months prior. We learned they are not in touch with workers in other Big Local areas - limiting opportunities to learn and share experiences. Engaging or working face to face with the community is part of the job for most, but many find getting people involved and attracting volunteers a challenge. Although common in voluntary programmes, this can impact on what they can do, their workload and their capacity.

As a resident-led programme, it is worth noting the experiences of workers who are also residents. Residents are progressing from Big Local volunteers into paid employment as workers, but their experiences are slightly different. They are less likely to have previous experience in similar roles or to have the highest level of formal education, but they bring experience, knowledge and skills from their previous involvement with Big Local. Residents are less likely to be in management or project delivery roles and are also less likely to have received training. Their route into employment and specific experiences are important to keep in mind.

Big Local was envisioned as a volunteer, resident-led programme and volunteers across Big Local are delivering plans and making a difference. Much of this work is not done without the support of others and for the majority of areas, using some of their Big Local funding to pay for support to help them deliver their plans is more common than not. Being a paid worker on a volunteer led programme brings opportunities and challenges. But as a result of the survey, Local Trust can better understand what it is like for them and what can be done to help them within Big Local.

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