

How are communities improving area reputations in the Big Local programme?

Communities in Control Study Research summary #5

Overview

The portrayal of particular geographical areas (e.g. wards, towns, estates) is shaped by a range of actors including the public, researchers, estate agents, politicians, public sector officials and journalists.

Residents living in areas with a poor reputation often report that these perceptions are formed by people who do not know their area well, and undermine a community's strength. They also report that these portrayals are often a less than accurate image of where they live.

Research studies have found that negative area reputation can affect communities in a range of ways:

- Directly impacting on stress and wellbeing
- Affecting job seeking through postcode 'stigma'
- Influencing whether people want to live in an area or visit there
- Stereotyping and labelling in the media

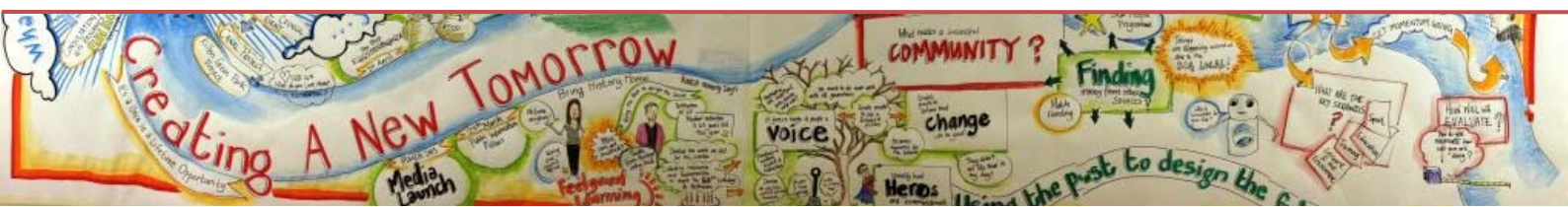
The reputation associated with areas can also shape social relationships. This may happen if residents distance themselves from their neighbours or blame others for the area's perceived stigma. There is also growing evidence of communities collectively taking action to challenge negative area reputation.

This summary explores how groups of residents are taking action to promote more positive portrayals of their local areas as part of the Big Local programme.

Key points

- There is public health evidence that living in an area with a negative reputation can have a negative impact on mental health, as well as social and economic opportunities.
- Stereotyping and stigma associated with particular areas may be a barrier to service use if residents feel looked down on by providers.
- Across Big Local areas, there are several instances of resident-led partnerships prioritising improving the reputation of their local area.
- Local activities to improve area reputation range from publicity work to promote positive news stories, as well as festivals, creative arts and neighbourhood improvements to encourage visitors.
- Where local people are able to construct alternative narratives of where they live privileging their perspectives and knowledge, this contributes to empowerment but also enables people to challenge inaccurate and undeserved representations of their areas.

We were actually getting estate agents and mortgage advisors telling us don't move there; don't move to the area so thankfully we ignored them.



How communities are taking action

Under Big Local, groups of residents in 150 areas in England have each been allocated £1 million and a range of support to improve their areas as places to live.

As part of the Communities in Control study, the research gathered examples of how residents and organisations involved in the place based programme — Big Local — are taking action to tackle this issue.

Research activities included reviewing the delivery plans produced by Big Local partnerships, reviewing media coverage and interviewing residents in some of the Big Local areas where reputation was identified to be a problem. The following sections highlight key themes from these findings.

Publicity and communications

Direct actions to improve area reputation included publicity work (e.g. press releases) aimed at the media. It also included communication activities such as producing community newsletters or setting up websites. Such activities were thought to challenge stereotypes by drawing attention to good news stories about what was happening in Big Local and the ways residents were involved in neighbourhood action.

To gain more detailed insights into issues of reputation, a review was carried out of local newspaper coverage of two Big Local areas. Overall, negative coverage accounted for just over a third and positive coverage for one fifth of reporting for both areas. Negative coverage frequently included reference to crime or anti-social behaviour. Positive stories were linked with action by community groups, and volunteering by residents in the area.

You can find out more by reading the CiC research summary #6 on the newspaper review of Big Local areas

Positive publicity was also seen as a way of encouraging participation in neighbourhood initiatives and volunteering as well as showcasing what was happening locally.

It could be that we put on some really interesting festivals or events that bring people here; ... and just changes the image of the area.

Festivals, heritage and creative arts

Community events such as festivals or the use of creative arts (e.g. music events/activities) were viewed as a way of showcasing areas as attractive places to be, encouraging people to visit and spend time there.

Such activities were not only thought to help improve perceptions of an area but created places for social interaction and contributed to the local economy (people using local shops or amenities).

Raising awareness of and celebrating the history and culture connected to a local community or neighbourhood were also identified as ways of building pride locally.

Such activities were thought to help connect people within a community and change the way that residents in an area identified with the places where they lived.



Every single thing that we do has a beneficial impact and it's gradually lifting people's morale, lifting the area.

Physical improvements to neighbourhoods

Like community events and festivals, physical improvements to the neighbourhood were thought to help improve an area's image and encouraging people to visit and spend time and money in the area.

These included 'facelift'/environmental schemes and investment in the open and built environment such as street-scaping.

Examples of physical improvements:

- Welcome signs to the area
- Planters and hanging baskets in public spaces
- Investing in shopping areas, markets and streets
- Community clean ups
- Alleygating

The importance of resident led action

In interviews at an early stage of Big Local, residents reported feeling looked down on, or not listened to in their attempts to engage with external officials and professionals.

Over time, some residents described how the process of connecting with professionals and initiating joint projects through Big Local was beginning to result in small shifts in relationships and attitudes.

Residents highlighted that the presence of Big Local funding in the area and its emphasis on resident control over decision making was also important in how 'outsiders' perceived the area. This was thought to increase the community's standing in their negotiations with external agencies. The allocation of the money to the area was also commented on as endorsement that the area and the people living there were 'worth' investing in.

The challenges of tackling area reputation

The research also identified several challenges associated with attempting to change how areas were portrayed. These included:

- No 'quick fixes' — area reputations take a long time to turn around
- While it was essential for residents to be involved in taking action, it was not the responsibility of residents alone
- The national media was difficult to influence, such as coverage in TV shows
- Positive stories about an area, including community activities could be overshadowed by negative coverage that an area received
- It was hard to motivate people locally when they believed the negativity expressed by others about the area.

So the idea is it's for local people and it's kind of celebrating what happens here; celebrating the local shops but also it will attract hopefully people from outside and they'll see that this is a really lovely and vibrant space.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The Communities in Control study

The independent research is investigating the health and social impacts of Big Local and aims to draw out lessons for the development of future community initiatives.

Two preliminary phases (2014/17) were funded by NIHR School for Public Health Research and gathered evidence on the early implementation of Big Local and early health and social impacts of the programme.

Phase 3 is funded by the NIHR Public Health Research Programme. It builds on these earlier stages, to investigate longer-term health and social outcomes for individuals and local populations living in Big Local areas

About Big Local

Big Local is a Lottery funded place based programme rolled out in 150 areas in England over at least ten years, managed by Local Trust (www.locatrust.org.uk)

In each area, residents have control over decision making about how funding is used to address neighbourhood priorities, whether this relates to the environment, the economy, social relationships or area reputation. Big Local could improve health and wellbeing by empowering people to have more control over their lives and by improving the local determinants of health in these areas.

This is one in a series of summaries reporting findings from the research

1. How collective control is developing
2. The role of money
3. Social contexts
4. Spaces for participation
5. Improving area reputations
6. Newspaper coverage and Big Local

Graphic narratives of health inequalities and community action



Read this online booklet by the illustrator Joe Decie, inspired by residents in Big Local areas

Visit the new website

Browse, read, watch and download resources from the study

www.communitiesincontrol.uk

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank residents of Big Local partnerships and Local Trust for their support to the research. Phase 1 and 2 was funded by the NIHR School for Public Health Research (SPHR). Phase 3 is funded by the NIHR Public Health Research Programme. The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

Funded by
NHS
National Institute for
Health Research