

Dover Big Local

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Over the past 10 years or so Dover Big Local has had a high profile in many local activities, events and organisations. But what and who comprises Dover Big Local?

To understand this, it is first important to realise that this is part of a national project, the like of which had never existed before. Central to the philosophy of the Big Local is the concept of communities being able to make their own decisions for the betterment of their area and this approach is designed to enable local residents to spend time, energy and money on matters that make for a permanent difference to people and communities.

A significant feature of the Big Local concept is that it is funded by The National Lottery Community Fund which provides at least £1m to each of 150 communities in England but the management of the financing is undertaken by Local Trusts. This significant ethos of the Big Local project is subject to appropriate checks and auditing to account for funding.

Each Big Local area has funding allocated to it on the basis that it is spent over a 10-15 year period at the local community's own speed and for its own priorities. This provision of long-term funding has the double benefit of certainty and, importantly, continuity. The Big Local project is significantly different to any previous community-funded projects. The national project ends in 2026 and all funding provided by National Lottery must be spent by then, but Big Local projects are encouraged to have a legacy plan for what happens after the funding from Lottery ends.

Other than funding, another key feature of the Big Local project is that it is community led, i.e. by residents of particular areas in which the Big Local project operates. This is designed to support local communities and the people in them in making a difference to local areas and communities. The essence of the project rests on the ability of local people to identify projects most important for their area and enabling the carrying out of projects in time determined by the local Big Local and as they would wish such projects to be carried out.

The overall concept has much to commend it in terms of being centred on the very people who live and work in the communities where projects and funding are provided.

In an age when local government or other authority structures have become more distant and detached the refreshing aspect of Big Local is that local communities are empowered to identify local requirements and can take action in addressing those requirements. Hopefully, the outcome of this decentralised initiative will enable communities to set their own priorities and enable local residents to feel their area is a good place in which to live. In 2019 Big Local areas reached a milestone in the initiative by reaching the halfway point in the spending plans over 10 - 15 years and no doubt an evaluation of the success or otherwise of the Big Local programme will be carried out to judge its efficacy and, importantly, to determine the future direction of the programme.

So how does Dover Big Local square up to the goal of the overall scheme? To understand this, I am indebted to Linda

Aldred, a community development worker appointed to lead Dover Big Local in terms of projects, funding and partnerships. In or about 2013 Dover District Council and a number of voluntary organisations came together to initiate Dover Big Local following £1m of Lottery funding being given to Dover District Council for community groups. With the District Council and input from Kent County Council, together with representatives of local community groups, Big Local was created. Society member and Newsletter Editor, Alan Lee, was one of those involved at the outset, along with John Angell, who this year was accorded the status of Honorary Freeman of the Town. Simon Crowley of Tersons was another representative and these, together with others, met in the Royal Cinque Ports Yacht Club to initiate the local Big Local.

Linda Aldred has a background in community development of over 30 years and takes a lead in the fortunes of Dover Big Local but the controlling force is a committee comprising ten local residents. The committee, after local consultation, established several areas of activity or benefit, such as green spaces, local economy, arts and culture, health and well-being and communications. Of the money available to give away major grant funding was made available as well as smaller community chest awards for projects that helped to deliver the objectives that community consultation had identified.

Areas where funding has been provided include the establishment and support of the Dover Pantry in the Charlton Shopping Centre and River Dour support through the White Cliffs Partnership. Seed funding for Dover Music Festival was provided as well as the set-up costs for the Co-Innovation Project that allowed many small businesses to try out their ideas at the former Co-op in

Stembrook, but now re-established in Biggin Street. A significant contribution has been made to Destination Dover which has contributed to increased cruise ship visits and a much-improved understanding of Dover as an attractive place to visit amongst tour operators and the general public. A big cost was the establishment of the Big Local Hub in the Charlton Shopping Centre. This provides an important facility signposting areas of interest and activity for local residents including elements for health and well-being in terms of knitting, singing and cooking, for example, where various groups come into the Hub and benefit from its funding. The hub until recently hosted Dover Big Local's job club, currently operating from The Beacon. The hub is also a centre for training with a wide range of courses offered. A second Hub is being developed in partnership with Mind. This space is intended to provide a wellbeing and mental health hub. All of Dover Big Local's decisions are made by its elected committee, currently chaired by Anita Luckett. It meets on the third Wednesday of each month, consulting widely with residents through the hub and pantry, various special interest groups, and community partners such as Dover District Council and Dover Town Council. Membership of Dover Big Local's partnership is open to all residents and organisations in the town of Dover, and it is a requirement of the national Big Local programme that the majority of decisionmakers are local residents, workers or business people, or students. A team of three hub staff, with Linda Aldred as hub manager, deliver events and courses, network with other Dover organisations and offer support to Dover people. Both the hub and Pantry welcome volunteers.

Dover Big Local's annual Urban Fete in Pencester Gardens provides not only family fun and a chance for local

organisations to showcase what they offer, but also is a great opportunity for Dover residents to share their ideas for the town and future projects. 24 September was the identified date for the Urban Fete 2022. Sadly, it rained.

The Dover Pantry has proved to be a remarkable success and helps many local people from deprived areas of the town and others who have fallen on hard times in the present economic context by providing a whole range of food. Both the Dover Big Local and the Pantry have proved to be trusted organisations and the Pantry operates as an independent service. It has 380 members with a waiting list and has strong connections with the Food Bank and with the Sunrise Café. Under the guidance of Cara Harvey, the employed Pantry Manager, Pantry volunteers undertake their tasks, from food pickups to service in the Pantry itself, as a matter of social responsibility and love rather than for money, making it possible for families to receive high quality food for just a £5 per week membership. In essence, Dover Big Local works in partnership with other local societies, charities, voluntary groups and statutory bodies such as Together4Dover, Transitions Dover, the NHS, the SmArt Project, Destination Dover, Dover Town Council and Dover District Council to offer opportunities and services to local people designed to improve the quality for life for all Dover people.

The national Big Local programme was a bold leap of faith to allow financially and socially challenged communities to self-determine how to invest significant funds to improve their lot. Across the country responses to this challenge have varied widely.

As the years pass by an assessment of the Big Local project will be required,

particularly as all local entities approach the end of the 10 – 15 year allocated period and Dover Big Local, along with others across the country, could soon be faced with a cliff-edge situation regarding funding but it is hoped that the legacy of Big Local will enable more community-led infrastructure projects to be initiated so that local communities are in a continuing situation of making local power a reality. The financial future beyond Big Local funding is not secure and we are all aware of the current challenges to the economy with rising living costs and an expected inflation crisis, the impact of which would probably be most keenly felt by deprived and poor neighbourhoods, so it will be important that communities are able to respond and adapt to changing needs with appropriate resources financially ensuring local residents and communities are able to influence policies affecting communities in their local area.

In Dover's case, it is to be hoped there will be an ability to keep the Hubs going enabling the Board and local volunteers to continue offering a community partnership for the benefit of the town. To that end, the committee of Dover Big Local formed a Community Interest Company, Dover Big Local CIC, which became one of the first in the country to administer the lottery funding itself. When the lottery funding ends this will become the legacy organisation. It has already received funding in a way that was not possible before, so that family holiday clubs, cooking classes and several other initiatives have been able to be delivered. Like all other Big Locals, Dover must continually account to the Lottery for what it has achieved and what it would like to continue to achieve, with the funds awarded by the Lottery mapped to formally agreed broad aims and objectives which the Lottery must approve before

the next instalment of funding is released. By and large, Dover Big Local has caught the spirit of the Big Local project and has demonstrated the generosity of local people to give their time and energies for the betterment of their communities. A good example of co-ordinated activity and achievement was brought about by the recent Covid pandemic when Together4Dover emerged and successfully provided support for many people who were challenged by the circumstances brought about by Covid, and Dover Big Local worked in partnership with Together4Dover to produce the positive outcomes that were seen during the last couple of difficult years.

In essence, the relevance of Dover Big Local is that it has acted as an enabling

organisation co-operating with partners for the benefit of the local community.

Dover Big Local Chair, Anita Luckett, said "Throughout its existence, Dover Big Local has been incredibly fortunate to be gifted the time and talents of its committee, partners and volunteers, without whom Dover would neither have received its funding, nor been able to award grants and directly deliver projects that have made a real difference to our town. We are developing plans so we can continue past the end of the Lottery funding and grow the membership of Dover Big Local so even more people can learn new skills, gain confidence, and enjoy living in our town. We hope everyone will support fundraising events, but most importantly keep telling us how we can help Dover be the place you love to live."



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