

How are communities tackling negative reputations of local areas?

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

Why reputation is an issue

Negative portrayals of areas are often linked to the perceptions of people living or working in or outside a geographical area. These may include residents in local neighbourhoods, estate agents, researchers, public sector officials and journalists.

As the quote below illustrates, the impact of a reputation on an area can include whether funding is invested locally and how the area is reported in newspapers or other media.

“Everything we do is for that reason to improve the image and reputation of the area and make it a better place to live in because before we set up we had a terrible reputation. Nothing was ever spent down [here] the only news that appeared in the paper was bad news.”

(Local resident)

There is also some evidence that living in an area with a negative reputation can impact upon the opportunities and wellbeing of local residents who live there.

Yet people living in areas that have a poor reputation often report that negative perceptions can stem from those who do not know their area very well and that images frequently do not match the reality of the place where they live.

“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.”

Key points

- Negative portrayals of areas can contribute to inequalities faced by communities as a result of stigma and/or stereotyping and by influencing whether people visit or want to live in an area.
- Poor area reputations can be challenged. There are a growing number of examples of how this is happening through place based initiatives that provide funding to local communities.
- Local activities in Big Local areas include promoting positive news stories in the media, community events, the use of creative arts and physical improvements to neighbourhoods.
- Actions led by communities also have a role in challenging assumptions about people who live in particular areas.



How communities are taking action

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

This research included reviewing the delivery plans produced by Big Local partnerships and interviewing residents in a small number of Big Local areas where reputation was identified to be a problem. The following sections highlight some key themes from these findings.

Publicity and communications

Direct actions to tackle reputation included publicity work (e.g. press releases, social media) aimed at the media. They also included bespoke communication activities such as community newsletters or websites. Such activities were thought to improve the image of areas through drawing attention to good news stories about what was happening in Big Local and the ways residents were involved.

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

Case study of media coverage

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 actions taken by community groups, fundraising and volunteering.



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).

Festivals, heritage and creative arts

- Annual events and fetes
- Year round programme of community festivals
- Celebrations of local heritage
- Information boards about places of interest or with historical significance
- Community music projects
- Public art in the neighbourhood

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

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.

Physical improvements to neighbourhoods

Like community events and festivals, physical improvements (e.g. to shopping areas) were thought to be a way of improving an area's image and encouraging people to visit the area and spend time there.

These included 'facelift'/environmental schemes and investment in the open and built environment of the neighbourhood



Examples of physical improvements:

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

The importance of resident led action

Residents highlighted that the presence of Big Local funding in the area and its emphasis on '*resident led action*' was also important in how 'outsiders' perceived residents and the area.

This was thought to help raise residents' confidence and status and also was seen as evidence that the area was 'worth' investing in.

Role of resident led action

In interviews at an early stage of Big Local, residents in some areas reported feeling 'stereotyped' or not listened to in their efforts to deal with external officials and professionals because of where they lived. As activity progressed locally, some residents interviewed described how the process of connecting with local professionals and initiating joint projects through Big Local was beginning to improve relationships and trust.

The challenges of tackling area reputation

Residents mostly felt that changing an area's reputation was possible.

However, residents also talked about the challenges of attempting to change how areas were portrayed. These included:

- No 'quick fixes' — area reputations take a long time to turn around
- National media — very difficult to influence portrayal of areas in some settings (e.g. national TV shows)
- Overshadowing progress — positive changes in areas may be missed because of negative coverage that an area receives
- Internal reputations — how to change residents' perceptions when local people believe the negativity expressed by others:

"Every single thing that we do has a beneficial [impact] and it's gradually lifting people's morale, lifting the area when people see something being spent in their area, it makes them a little bit more proud of living in that area." (Local resident)

Discussion points

- Who is responsible for any negative portrayals of the area(s) where you live or work?
- What effect does a negative area reputation have upon people living and working there?
- What can be done to challenge negative portrayals of areas or prevent these from occurring? What is the role of different 'actors' (e.g. journalists, public sector professionals, community organisations, national funders, policy makers, researchers)?
- What are likely to be the main challenges in tackling negative area reputations?

About the Communities in Control study

Big Local is funded in 150 areas in England, and is managed by Local Trust. The Communities in Control study is evaluating whether programmes like Big Local can help to reduce the inequalities that exist in health between people living in different geographical areas. Big Local could do this by empowering groups of residents to have more control collectively over the decisions affecting their local areas.

Phase 1 and 2 of the Communities in Control study were undertaken by researchers based at the NIHR School for Public Health Research (SPHR): Fuse, The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health; LiLaC, a collaboration between the Universities of Liverpool and Lancaster; The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the University of Exeter Medical School and the University of Sheffield. The ongoing study is coordinated by Professor Jennie Popay (LiLaC).

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Visit the SPHR Communities in Control website:

<http://sphr.nihr.ac.uk/health-inequalities/home/>

For more information about Big Local, visit www.localtrust.org.uk

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