
Citation:

Warwick-Booth, L and Coan, S (2021) Covid19 Grants Evaluation: Communities of Interest Final Report December 2021. Project Report. Leeds Beckett, Leeds.

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Document Version:

Monograph (Published Version)

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Covid19 Grants Evaluation

Communities of Interest Final Report December 2021

Louise Warwick-Booth and Susan Coan

Headlines

- Small amounts of funding at a very local level were easy to apply for and processed rapidly. The funding model used as part of this project supported a tailored approach with a personal touch, so workers felt able to provide people within their communities of interest with what they needed.
- The model of delivery involving trusted organisations and community members working together to respond to Covid19. The model was described favourably by all evaluation participants. The peer support aspect of the model was unique and welcome. Learning about what other groups were doing improved professional practice, provided feedback and moral support, and promoted referrals/signposting as well as collaboration and partnership work.
- Project outputs funded by the grant scheme were described positively by professionals and included the delivery of small-scale projects and the development of resources. Evaluation participants identified important outcomes from the project as a whole such as the creation of a supportive network and capacity building; shared learning and tailored support from Forum Central and Leeds City Council as well as increased partnership working. Some participants discussed how the grant scheme had raised morale, at a time when this was much needed.
- Community members also described positive benefits from being involved in the grant scheme. For example, learning new skills (IT); developing skills (working professionally); delivering projects that they tailored to support their own community of interest; improving their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others in the community; and communicating up to date Covid19 information about safety through their own local networks. Participant characteristics were intersectional.

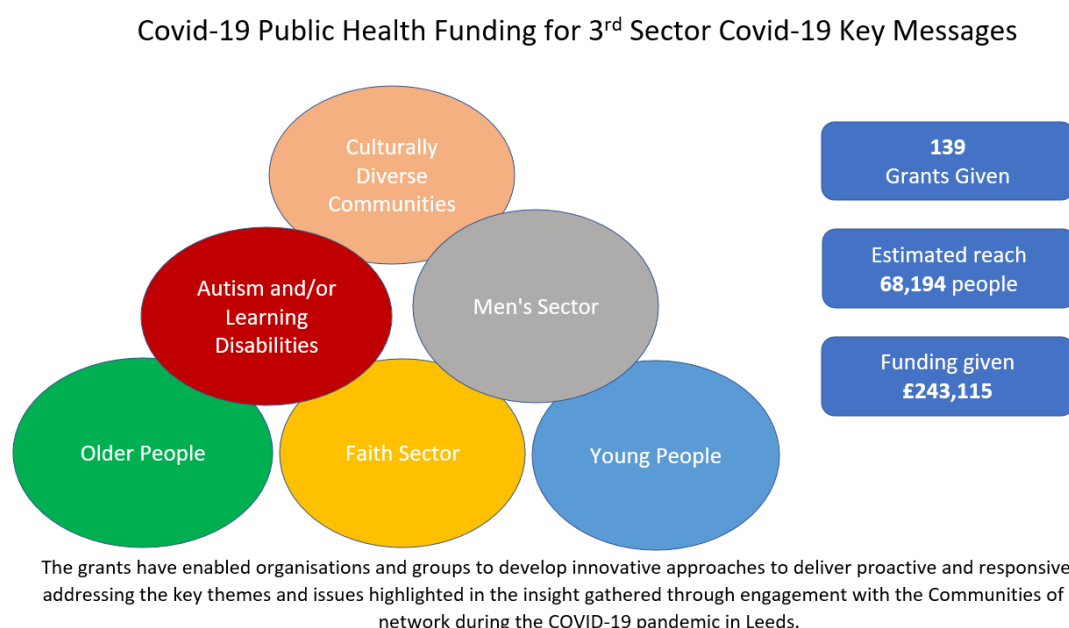
Overview of the Grants Programme

In the wake of Covid19, Leeds City Council responded to the pandemic in a variety of ways, including securing funding to develop a local community-based response to the pandemic. A key component of this work focused upon engaging with and resourcing the Third Sector in partnership with Forum Central.

The Third Sector have a wide reach into communities across the city and an established track record of working with vulnerable groups. This work over a 12-month period involved several elements:

- Ongoing communications about Covid19 (e.g. via social media and online briefings)
- Community engagement, for those identified as being most in need including young people, ethnically diverse groups, older people, Travelers and men located in communities of interest
- Micro-grants (small grants to support communities to respond differently)
- Coordination

This report presents evaluation findings from the micro-grants component of the work which were administered, managed, and coordinated by Forum Central. The figure below provides an overview of the work.



In addition, the Communities of Interest Network (COI Network) was also established as part of the Third Sector Outbreak Plan in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Developed by Forum Central in partnership with Voluntary Action Leeds, Healthwatch, and Leeds City Council, the COI Network was built on trusted relationships with local community organisations and the richness and diversity of the Third Sector in Leeds. The COI Network was established as a place for community organisations to share knowledge and insight related to what was happening in communities, the challenges faced, and the successes achieved. The COI Network aimed to ensure the flow of information and support relating to Covid-19 reached all communities, especially the most marginalised and vulnerable communities. The COI Network sought to enable effective local two-way dialogue between communities and providers (third sector organisations and statutory agencies) and support active involvement from communities to shape solutions to best meet their needs. The main activities of the



COI Network were virtual sessions to share knowledge of Covid19, and email updates with information and resources. The COI network was evaluated by Sarah Frost and Simon Rippon, September 2021.

Our evaluation approach

Our evaluation focused especially on capturing the experiences of community members to gather their views about the process, experience, and impact of the micro-grants. The evaluation was carried out between September 2020 and September 2021 and used a range of qualitative data collection approaches:

- i. Remote interviews (online via videoconferencing and via telephone);
- ii. An online qualitative survey was offered to participants as an alternative to participation in interviews;
- iii. Online observation of project meetings was also undertaken.

During the course of this evaluation research we had to adhere to the Government's Covid-19 guidelines. No face-to-face data collection or meetings took place; therefore the entire evaluation was conducted remotely.

Evaluation Findings

Funding application process

In general it was reported that the application process was **really accessible and a positive experience**:

"The application progress was easy enough and help to clarify things was there by a non-judgmental helper." [Survey respondent 2, older people]

The timescale in which funding was awarded was **very quick** compared to other applications, which supported organisations in delivering a **rapid response to Covid19** within their community of interest:

"The approach of the grant scheme is very straightforward: quick application process, found out very quickly whether we had been successful, got the funding very quickly, excellent support from the team." [Survey respondent 1, older people]

There was also discussion of **flexible delivery** being enabled and encouraged as well as reasonable monitoring requirements:

"The evaluation and monitoring is not demanding, but achievable." [Survey respondent 7, older people]

Forum Central attempted to build trust with organisations through removing access barriers to funding, however not all funders are able to work in this manner.

Model of delivery

This model of delivery involved trusted organisations working together **flexibly** without the need for voluntary sector organisations to write and submit long applications. This was favourably viewed by all involved:

*"It's definitely a new way of working. This project is **all based on trust and relationships** that people have in the area already. The reason it has been successful is the fact that **there's been very little paperwork**. [Organisations] are trying to make it as easy as possible in one of the most difficult times for third sector organisations... It's also a **really organic project** and lots of different things spiral from it because there is that trust." [Professional working with young people]*

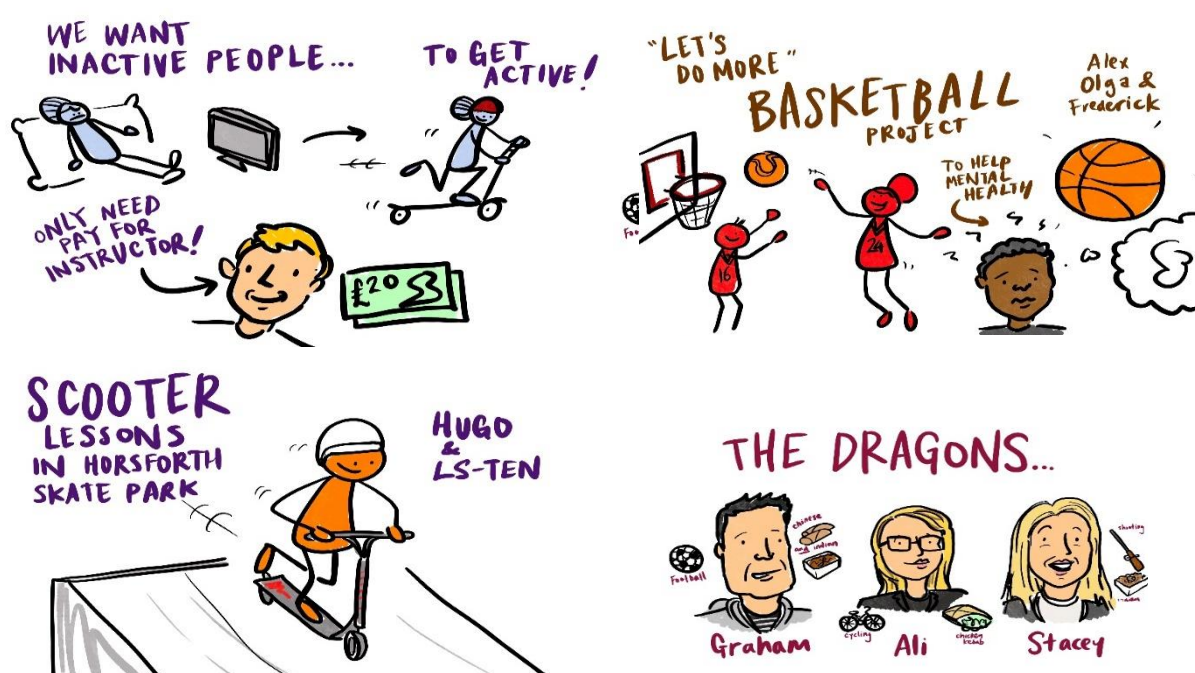
The model included peer support from fellow grant recipients through information sharing, networking opportunities for learning as well as mentoring. Regular meetings using Zoom allowed those delivering the projects to share new ideas, learn about other services, and provide moral support, as well as being a means of sharing public health updates from Leeds City Council. Professionals working with young people were offered mentor training, which was reported as providing workers with the skills to deal with the Covid19 situation as well as enabling them to develop practical ways to hold and manage challenging conversations with young people.

Small scale project outcomes

The grant scheme enabled community groups to design support based upon their ideas, which many described as positive. Involving community members led to different projects being delivered through a **co-production approach**, such as using a Dragon's Den for young people to pitch their project ideas:

"For people in the community they feel they have a place to have their voice heard." [Survey Respondent 1, professional working with young people]

"The Dragons Den has been a great example of providing a platform, developing skills and confidence along with listening and empowering our future leaders that what they say is heard. The projects they gained investment for are now being led by young leaders across the city."





Increased **confidence**, better ability to **network**, and **being able to work with professionals** also arose from participation in the online support meetings:

*“Mixing with people, knowing people, getting lots of contact numbers for people...more **confidence**... how to speak to other people...built that skill now...talking to professional people...it is making a lot of difference. Funding made so much difference...everyone was so depressed for 7 months, staying indoors...”* [Faith Sector community member]

Furthermore, professionals involved in this work reported that their **reach into communities had widened** as a result of the ways in which they worked with community members:

“Thanks to the funding, we have been able to carry on supporting older people who could not fully benefit from our services because they were digitally excluded. Our tablet lending scheme has allowed people who feel lonely and socially isolated to take part...” [Survey respondent 1, older people]

Positive messaging

Participants described how their involvement had enabled them to **spread positive messages about Covid19** (safety, prevention, and vaccination focused information) within communities of interest, through the project delivery aspect as well as via their informal networks:

“Being able to produce a paper copy of our newsletter and send it out to 10,000 people has helped to ensure that those who are not digitally connected, have had access to vital information about support and key messages from Public Health.” [Survey respondent 5, older people]

Partnership working

Another key success outlined by participants was the way in which organisations came together and collaborated to share learning and resources. Whilst Leeds has a history of strong networking and partnership approaches, the grant scheme introduced organisations who had not previously met and led to new connections being formed:

“It’s been a community of grant recipients...Forum [Central] helps workers stay motivated and funders get more value for money – people sharing ideas, referring to each other, working together.”

“The way that partners worked together to make this happen is something we should not lose...the trust between partners...the relationships we have built have enabled us to keep connected with lots of groups that we wouldn’t have normally been connected with.”

Areas for improvement

- Some community members felt that the time period for funding projects could have been longer, and some aspects of the application process could have been made clearer (deadlines).
- The continuation of funding such as this, year on year was requested. One example to support this was that some communities cannot afford to eat properly so short-term funding does not resolve such issues.

- Some community members (e.g. volunteers) were unable to join information sessions when they were held during the daytime, so they missed out on updates and therefore felt that more guidance on Covid19 messaging was needed to improve their project delivery.
- Considering the gender of workers to increase reach to some communities of interest such as older men in the Gypsy and Traveller Community.
- Support for specific communities from funders to develop their skills in applying for funding e.g. faith communities need to be enabled to apply and be made aware of their eligibility.

Appendices - summary of data collection

Community of interest	Data Collection
Young people	Observation of meetings (n=2) Interviews with professionals (n=2) Survey professionals (n=1)
Older people	Meeting observations (n=2) Interviews (n=5 professionals) Email comments (n=1 professional) Survey responses (n=10, 9 professionals and 1 volunteer)
Faith Sector	Interviews with faith sector community members (n=2)
Men	Interviews with a volunteer and a worker (n=2)
Total	27 participants

We sampled using an approach that has successfully worked for us in previous evaluations, contacting potential participants who had consented to take part, and allow their details to be shared by Forum Central. However, some community members did not respond to us contacting them, and some were busy delivering support work which made participation in the evaluation challenging. We were also mindful of digital exclusion in some communities of interest but had to conduct the research online and by phone due to Covid19 restrictions. Despite the restrictions, it remains the case that many people feel more comfortable in person when talking to strangers.

Our evaluation data is drawn from 27 participants, with a total of 55 contacts supplied to us, who we reached out to for interviews. The offer of a brief survey increased participant numbers by 10, and we conducted observations of meetings to increase the scope of the evaluation. Whilst this did not achieve a large sample, the participants characteristics were intersectional therefore, in this instance, our qualitative evaluation provided rich detail and useful learning. For example, one participant was a man who represented the Jewish community (faith sector), as well as being older. There were overlaps between faith and older people, and men were sampled across all of the communities of interest.