



Ageing Better



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Micro-funding: Empowering Communities to Create Grassroots Change

Ecorys with The National Lottery Community Fund



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Weekly micro-funded lunch club at Bristol Sikh Temple, Bristol

Executive summary

Ageing Better is a National Lottery funded programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, (TNLCF), the largest funder of community activity in the UK. It aims to develop creative ways for people aged over 50 to be **actively** involved in their local communities, helping to combat **social isolation** and **loneliness**. The programme is running from 2015-2021 and is delivered by 14 cross-sector **partnerships** across England.

This document shares learning about how **micro-funding** approaches can provide unique benefits, and is aimed at commissioners, policy makers and practitioners working in the loneliness, health and social care sectors, and related areas.

What is micro-funding?

Micro-funding models vary in design, scope and scale, and at present there is no single widely accepted definition.

The Ageing Better partnerships developed a working definition of micro-funding:

- Small and accessible amounts of funding which empower very local activity
- Resource that gets straight to the heart of a community

According to this definition, micro-funding can be interpreted as a funding approach, rather than an amount of money. Micro-funding empowers local people to initiate ideas and create solutions using local assets, to address local needs, by securing small investments to pay for venues and equipment. Micro-funding can offer local people a more responsive, accessible and manageable option than traditional grant programmes (which are commissioned and led by paid staff). Micro-funding offers an alternative community-centred approach, and a new dynamic, in which local people commission and steer activity, supported by paid staff and trainers as needed.

“The decisions are made by the committee...it is very much our decision making, and [the project staff] don't steer our decision making. They are able to provide extra information if we don't have it, but I feel as though we are really empowered to make the decisions.” (Decision maker micro-funding)

“Getting funding to hold sewing classes has re-ignited my passion...It's also enabled me to meet new people...helping me through the transition from full time business back into tutoring. Running the workshops is fun and has lifted my spirits no end, at the end of a very difficult period of my life. It's also really lovely to see someone who believes they have no skill walk out with a completed bag and a renewed sense of pride.” (Micro-funded group lead)¹

Key findings

Ageing Better partnerships invested £4.4 million in micro-funding activities between 2015 and August 2019

This is 7% of the total Ageing Better budget

1,976 micro-funding awards were made between 2015 and August 2019

Through Ageing Better, local people over 50 are commissioning, designing and delivering micro-funded activities in areas across England:

- Birmingham
- Bristol
- Cheshire
- East Lindsey
- Greater Manchester
- Leeds
- Leicester
- Middlesbrough
- Sheffield
- Thanet
- Torbay

The duration of micro-funding awards ranged from 1 day to 4 years. **However, awards most commonly ran for between 2 months to 1 year.**

Typically, individual micro-funding maximum investments ranged between £20-£25,000 although this varied across partnerships:

- 2 partnerships - £200 - £250
- 5 partnerships - £2,000- £3,128
- 4 partnerships - £19,950 - £31,200

¹ Ageless Thanet and Social Enterprise Kent, (2019), *AGELESS THANET COMMUNITY FUND, JAN 2018-OCT 2019*.

The Ageing Better programme is generating valuable learning about micro-funding approaches. We found that:

- Micro-funding empowers people over 50 to lead the decision making and running of activities, putting them in control in their communities.
- Micro-funded models can be developed to suit local contexts and a range of funding levels. Micro-funding supports very local activities which can effectively reach people over 50 at risk of, or experiencing, social isolation and/or loneliness. People told us they found these activities more welcoming and accessible than existing community activities. In some areas, micro-funding plugged gaps in affordable community activities.
- People over 50 supported the commissioning of micro-funded activities by using their skills and knowledge to assess applications and provide advice. This enhanced decision making, improved opportunities for their peers and built new connections within their communities.
- By building on local assets, micro-funding also enhances people over 50s' confidence, skills and knowledge to run activities for their local community. Both participants on decision making panels and those people over 50 delivering funded activity often told us that involvement improved their confidence, wellbeing and social connections.
- Micro-funded models provide opportunities for people over 50 to initiate and steer activity, whilst funding co-ordinators or trainers as needed to support day-to-day delivery. Wraparound support helps to build local capacity. A paid coordinator was often employed on larger projects, to cover management and administrative functions. Support with outreach, marketing and transport are also often needed to embed micro-funded activities in communities. This support empowers local people to develop at their own pace and focus on delivering activities for their peers.
- Micro-funding enables new groups to start small and grow at a manageable pace. Most micro-funded projects are un-constituted, meaning that funding is managed by a third party, enabling volunteers to focus on delivery. However, some Ageing Better micro-funded investments expressed a desire to formalise and become constituted groups (enabling them to open a bank account to manage income and outgoings in their own right). Ageing Better partnerships offer optional support to assist groups to become constituted if desired. Groups that are constituted tend to be driven by an ambitious leader.

- People over 50 are keen to sustain their own groups initiated with a micro-funding investment. People feel a strong connection to micro-funded activities because they are designed and led by local communities. This approach increases participant (volunteers) commitment; many are willing to make small contributions to cover the cost of activities and refreshments to support sustainability. Ageing Better groups are testing a variety of sustainability options, including: self-financing (charging members' subscriptions); selling products to gain an income; and fundraising initiatives. Given the smaller cost of micro-funding approaches, groups are able to explore how to sustain their activity through their own skills and resources, rather than relying on traditional grant funding, giving them more power and ownership.
- Micro-funding offers a new dynamic between commissioners, providers and local people, increasing local capacity to generate their own solutions tailored to diverse contexts, complementing larger scale investments in core programmes. Micro-funding offers a rich environment to 'test and learn'; generating evidence about 'what works' for potential funders. The approach is well placed to support social prescribing and enables communities to celebrate the things they most value.

"Anything else would have required some quite daunting applications. This enabled us to start on a proportionate basis... we knew we were going to start with about 10 people. There's no way we could justify a £10-15,000 grant to kick something off... a tenth of that amount was obviously doable. We can start looking at grander schemes now we have manageable and sustainable growth behind us."
(Participant volunteer/micro-funded group lead)

This report is accompanied by a Summary paper, Method note, and short film available [online](#).



Walking Football by Your Backyard CIC, Time to Shine, Leeds

1.0 Introduction

Ageing Better is a National Lottery funded programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, (TNLCF), the largest funder of community activity in the UK. It aims to develop creative ways for people aged over 50 to be actively involved in their local communities, helping to combat **social isolation** and **loneliness**. The programme is running from 2015-2021 and is delivered by 14 cross-sector **partnerships** across England.

The programme aims to enable people aged over 50 to be:

- Less isolated and lonely;
- Actively involved in their communities, with their views and participation valued more highly;
- More engaged in the design and delivery of services that improve their social connections.

The Ageing Better programme also aims to support:

- Services that improve the planning, co-ordination and delivery of social activities;
- The future design of services by developing better evidence about how to reduce isolation and loneliness for people aged over 50.

The programme sets out to achieve this by avoiding imposing top-down models and instead encouraging the development of different local activities and delivery models. Each partnership draws on the skills and experience of people aged over 50, making use of the unique nature and assets of each area, to meet locally identified needs. This allows each partnership to develop its own activities and events based on key strengths, resulting in different approaches being developed by the 14 cross sector partnerships across England. Partnerships are encouraged to **test and learn** throughout their programme, building on evidence and shared learning so that their work has the most impact possible. This allows them to respond to challenges, honestly reflect and share what has been less successful and capitalise on opportunities to fill gaps in services whilst exploring new approaches.

This paper shines a spotlight on micro-funding, providing insights into approaches led by people over 50 as commissioners and deliverers of activity. Micro-funding models vary in design and scope, and at present there is no single widely accepted definition

of this investment approach. Ageing Better partnerships, working with the over 50s, developed a working definition of micro-funding²:

- Small and accessible amounts of funding which empower very local activity
- Resource that gets straight to the heart of the community

Micro-funding refers to a type of funding approach rather than an amount of money. Ageing Better partnerships are exploring whether activities commissioned and led by people over 50 reach their peers at risk of, or experiencing, social isolation and loneliness. Micro-funding empowers local people to initiate ideas and create solutions using local assets, to address local need, by securing small investments to pay for venues and resources. Micro-funding can offer local people a more responsive, accessible and manageable option than traditional grant programmes (which are commissioned and led by paid staff). Micro-funding offers an alternative community-centred approach, and a new dynamic, in which local people commission and steer activity, supported by paid staff and trainers as needed.

This paper provides insights for policy makers, commissioners (including small organisations), and providers supporting local micro-funding schemes. It explores diverse micro-funding schemes led by people over 50, particularly un-constituted groups.³ By utilising micro-funding, these groups offer insights into reaching some of their more isolated and lonely peers.

This paper has been written by Ecorys, the lead independent national evaluator of the Ageing Better programme, in collaboration with TNLCF. Details on the **wider evidence base** related to micro-funding and the evaluation **methodology** can be found in a [separate note](#).

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² Working definition agreed during the *Framing the ambition for Ageing Better* workshop held in December 2017.

³ The glossary provides a working definition for (un)constituted groups.



Successful 'Bright Ideas' were awarded funding by the decision making panel at Brightlife Cheshire

2.0 Outcomes – micro-funding works

Micro-funding benefits individuals and strengthens communities, by enabling commissioners and organisations to create a new dynamic between ‘providers’ and ‘volunteers’. Here we explore some of the benefits of micro-funding and consider why local people and organisations might want to build micro-funding models.

Evidence base

This paper draws largely on qualitative research with stakeholders from Ageing Better partnerships. The focus of micro-funding on building the capacity of individuals, organisations and communities, does not lend itself to quantitative assessment. The ultimate outcome from micro-funding is the transfer of ownership to individuals and communities. This exchange is based on trust and capacity building, outcomes which cannot be monitored in line with traditional grant making programmes, as success is ultimately seen by an increase in autonomy.

“We can't measure outcomes. We can't measure if they have stuck to their guns. If we've passed them, it's because their criteria fit our brief, but... no one is in a position to actively monitor.” (Volunteer)⁴.

2.1 Empowering individuals and communities

Ageing Better participants (both participant volunteers and volunteers) told us they experience a range of outcomes from being involved in micro-funding. Most commonly:

- Micro-funded projects empower people aged over 50 to create and develop local community groups, and to make decisions about funding groups through decision making panels. Many stakeholders and participant volunteers felt that people **refined or improved their skills** through these activities. Participant volunteers highlighted improvements to their organisation, bid-writing and

⁴ Yarker, S. and Thorley, J. (August 2019, page 17) *Changing a place: Microfunding, co-production and community development*. (Awaiting publication).

monitoring and evaluation skills⁵. Advice and support from employed project staff and delivery partners was available if needed. Volunteers have also increased their commissioning and organisational skills, through training opportunities arising from micro-funded activity, and learnt new crafts.

*"We've got a massive spectrum of people involved who can share their knowledge."
(Project lead)*

*"It's been fascinating because you never stop learning, not just skills the [workshop leader] can pass on, but guys there... you're learning a lot from the others in the group. As you spend time with them, it's a very affable group, it gels together well... It's really a case of how can we help each other... It's become a little community in its own right."
(Volunteer)*

- Individuals increasingly recognise their abilities to self-organise, collectively **building capacity** to enhance community activities. Volunteers and participant volunteers became increasingly more **confident** through their micro-funding activities, recognising their skills and sharing them with others.

*"I have taught and shown other people to crochet in the group... I watched Youtube videos and taught myself how to crochet. Other people didn't know how to crochet at all, so I taught them, and they have been practicing at home."
(Participant volunteer)*

*"The volunteers definitely have benefitted, they're more confident now."
(Project lead)*

Participants and participant volunteers told us that the peer-led aspect of many micro-funding activities helped to build **social connections**. Micro-funding helps to **reduce social isolation and loneliness**, by funding local people to lead activities which reach more marginalised people, who may be less likely to attend traditional clubs and societies. These activities provide opportunities for participants with a wide range of physical disabilities to engage in wellbeing activities alongside their peers,

⁵ Survey data from 13 people involved in the 'Start Up Squads' in Sheffield found that half reported 'rekindling a skill or trying something new'. Cited in Age Better in Sheffield's (2018) *End of Project Report - Start Up 2015-2018*. Data limitations are discussed in the separate Method note.

improving health and wellbeing, by increasing their engagement in decision making and gentle exercise.

“Everyone gets lonely sometimes... it is very easy to get isolated so it is very important to have these places to go to. You do meet lovely people and want to go back... I for one am a shy person and it’s brought me out of myself, its great fun!” (Participant volunteer)

“Some of the original group are still coming along, whom we know have very little else in their lives... One lady [participates] twice a week... she likes being with the group and likes all the other folk we meet...for her it really has been a life line.” (Participant volunteer/micro-funded group lead)

Participant volunteers also build up the confidence of peers attending the groups they lead, by inspiring them and valuing their input to the group.

“One of our members calls me ‘the boss’, in a nice way. The group members always ask me for homework as well, so I have to choose a subject to give them, to look at for the following week. We have built up a trust over this past year, and I know what they are capable of. I know some are very, very good writers... I want to encourage that in them.” (Participant volunteer/micro-funded group lead)

Many people **improved their social connections and increased their friendship circles**. People who met through micro-funding began to meet regularly outside the group too. Bringing people together locally around a shared interest is a key catalyst for facilitating connections and can build long-term friendships⁶. Micro-funding enables more diverse projects to be funded, attracting a wide range of people, who form relationships around these shared interests. Ageing Better in Birmingham runs a carers hub. Network Enablers, (community development workers), identify relevant groups and organisations and research local options for carers. The hub offers micro-funding options, encouraging carers to develop bespoke activities by applying for up to a £2,000 fund to set up a group or activity through its Ageing Better Fund. Through

⁶ By creating the conditions for people to form strong networks, micro-funding can help to improve mental wellbeing and reduce social isolation and loneliness through building genuine friendships. This is noted in Sheffield Hallam University (2017) Policy lessons from the Bags of Help grant programme evaluation:

<https://www4.shu.ac.uk/research/cresr/sites/shu.ac.uk/files/tesco-bags-of-help-grant-programme.pdf>

this, carers enjoyed working alongside peers without caring responsibilities, helping to set up activities and provide peer-to-peer support on an informal basis.

- The Small Funds project in Leeds highlighted how participants have increased confidence and social connections:

“I am talking and mixing with people more... it has built up my confidence, I used to be nervous but I have completely changed... I wouldn't have been able to speak up at something like this [the focus group] before, but now I will.” (Participant⁷)

- Several micro-funded projects in Thanet incorporate a competitive element into social activities through sport, helping to build the confidence and self-esteem of participants with a range of disabilities. For example, the Boccia club supports people with conditions including Cerebral Palsy and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Local people over 50 bid for micro-funding to lead activities, providing a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere, which draws people to the group.

“It gives [participants] motivation... Suddenly they find something because they have a little hand-eye coordination, that they're not bad at it. More practice, better they get. They find 'we're quite good at this'. And they're doing something ...they can beat half a dozen people at the club... winning is a great boost to everyone's confidence.” (Participant volunteer/micro-funded group lead)

In this way, micro-funding can enhance **mental wellbeing**, by reigniting people's sense of purpose and achievement. This also led to **physical health** benefits for some participants.

⁷ University of Sheffield, *Small Funds Report*. Available at: <https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/assets.timetoshine.co.uk/Care-Connect-Small-Funds-Report.pdf>

Greater Manchester

The Greater Manchester partnership appointed eight Local Delivery Leads (LDLs), who support local people to design applications for review by decision making panels. The decision making panels themselves are run by people over 50, supported by a paid local coordinator. The decision making panels agree which local ideas should be invested in. Given the scale of micro-funding activities in Greater Manchester, the local coordinator plays an important organising and reporting role, but is not involved in decision making. The investments give autonomy to local people to deliver activities in ways that appeal to and engage people over 50. The investments have created a new dynamic between group leaders and participants, bringing about a range of outcomes. For example, a Pilates class run by a person over 50 has increased participants' confidence and knowledge to partly self-manage a range of health conditions. The peer-led approach empowers people to take ownership, leading to behaviour changes that participants' feel more able to sustain independently.

"I think [the micro-funding approach] makes you feel that you're not such a novice, because if it's set-up [by somebody] who's older than me, not some highfalutin teacher, then you don't feel quite so inadequate... We all learn together... it's actually helped me to manage [my condition], live with it, rather than the pain dominate me.... The Pilates has loosened everything up, and once you know how to do the exercises you can do them at home... So, it's not just in the class, it's actually outside of the class as well. That's been really good for me, really, really good." (Participant)

- People over 50 are also **developing peer support networks** through micro-funded groups. Local people identified a need to improve social connections through micro-funding consultation events and were encouraged to apply for a small investment to start their own activity. For example, the Greater Manchester and Cheshire partnerships ran outreach community consultation events as a first step to generate micro-funding ideas. Micro-funding enables local people to gain small investments to take forward activities that would be too small for charities to run through traditional commissioning approaches. For example, in Cheshire micro-funding has been used to form a community café group for people over 50 with disabilities. The group are 'inclusive' and never leave anyone behind. This approach has increased participants' confidence to try different community activities.

"It's somewhere to go and something to do... Helping people as they come along and making friends with them... sometimes you see people when you're out, you

stop and have a chat, so it spreads your friends out. I know more people coming here.” (Volunteer)

- Micro-funding empowers participants and volunteers to become **more engaged in their local community**. For example, in Sheffield, participant volunteers developed ‘spin-off’ groups from activities started through the ‘Start Up Squad’ micro-funding project. By gaining a small investment, people learn to design and run their own group. The experience builds people’s confidence that they can create solutions to meet local needs. Some micro-funded groups connected with each other, further developing local connections and offering new opportunities.

“I know for some members of the group it has reduced isolation. One is a widow and was very distressed when she started to come, it was so painfully obvious. Yes, it makes a difference; I wouldn't do it if it didn't. They are a good group.” (Participant volunteer/micro-funded group lead)

2.2 Informing policy development and systems design

Micro-funding offers policy makers and commissioners the potential to rethink traditional grant making approaches and offers a new dynamic, which invests in person-centred approaches, by offering local people the opportunity to design and deliver their own solutions to local problems.

2.2.1 Improving reach and efficiency

Micro-funding has been tested by public services and grant making bodies to some extent, but commissioners can be cautious about this investment approach as it does not tend to result in the collection of clear outcomes data, or evaluations which can prove value and impact.

“Micro-funding is everywhere if you look hard enough... Some local councillors have a small councillors' fund they can discretionally use. It... enables little pots of funding for bright ideas... [The challenge is] how you understand what that's doing when it's only a small amount per place and there are wider forces acting in a place, so you can't understand what it's changing and how.” (Partnership lead)

Ageing Better enables local people and organisations to use micro-funding with particular target groups, to test at scale whether the approach can reach marginalised groups, who are less likely to engage with mainstream public services and community organisations. Emerging findings suggest micro-funding can re-shape

the relationship between individuals, commissioners and providers. For example, in Leicester the local authority has recently provided £5,000 funding to Community Connectors to enable small grants of up to £200 to be awarded to kick start emerging, non-constituted groups. In Greater Manchester, a councillor has worked closely with local micro-funded groups supporting their work and utilising their experiences to encourage other people to take up micro-funding opportunities to shape their local communities.

“Using council connections, I often advise different groups - other people that they can contact... I've been able to use some of the groups expertise to advise groups in my ward. It's been amazing how the successful ideas are now going to spread... I'm a facilitator... I can see the good work... This is all about legacy... other groups can use that expertise and pick up on what they've learnt. There's a lot of that going on now... [They've] got all the answers, all the ideas, seen what works in other areas.” (Councillor, project partner)

Micro-funding enables commissioners to devolve some responsibility to local people to develop their own solutions. The approach empowers people to build on their lived experience to design and run activities which are fit-for-purpose. This improves service efficiency by investing in peer-led activities which help scarce resources reach more marginalised groups.

“It's superb because it's all bottom-up. What you see so many times with the council is, councillors, officers [decide]: 'This is how we do things, and this is what you need.' It's not about that, it's about encouraging the groups to have the confidence so they can decide what they need, what they want, what they think will work in their areas. From what I'm seeing, it's been very successful.” (Councillor, project partner)

In this way, local authorities are increasingly recognising the benefits of investing in micro-funding approaches which enable committees made up of local people to assess funding applications for new community activities. Grant making bodies such as TNLCF, are also exploring the benefits of micro-funding approaches in diverse contexts.

Here, TNLCF explain why they were keen to invest in micro-funding.

“We came up with doing a micro-funding approach, because... people are incredibly intimidated by our awards processes, even our smaller awards processes, the people we would want to reach don't want to engage with it, or are frightened of it...” (TNLCF, regional lead)

As a funder, TNLCF recognised the opportunity to improve their reach through micro-funding. TNLCF designed a micro-funding model with a local community and collaboratively tested each stage of the process, to see if it worked.

“We decided we wanted to fund people that Awards for All couldn’t fund; individuals and really small grassroots community activities, non-constituted groups [by] having a process where people “apply”... a very, very light touch process, through an anchor community organisation, which is a residents forum. The applications go to a “panel”, which includes [TNLCF], so we are still involved in decision making. It gives out grants of between £50-£1,000 locally... it was very, very successful. We spent the money in six months which we had planned for a year. We now have a larger programme which is funded via Reaching Communities, and is about £15,000 a year.” (TNLCF, regional lead)

TNLCF in Northern Ireland has also piloted micro-funding approaches. Three local teams delivered up to £5,000 in micro-grants of up to £500 each in their geographic area. Each local team was able to decide on the target audience and decision making process. In Belfast, TNLCF developed micro-funding activities with the BME community, who were less connected into existing programmes. A micro-funding event was delivered in Clogher Valley, about 60 miles west of Belfast, to consult the public about which projects to fund.

2.2.2 Micro-funding and systems change

Micro-funding can inform the redesign of local services, by transferring investment into the community itself. This approach empowers local people to become part of the solution, by receiving small investments to help transform their communities. Micro-funding offers opportunities for a wide range of commissioners and providers to empower local people to drive change for themselves and their communities.

“A number of local authorities were looking at moving away from services and transactions to more relational approaches to places.” (Partnership lead)

For example, micro-funding can be invested to develop community-led support to work alongside, or as a follow-on, to health provision. Micro-funding works by targeting small-scale investments, funding very localised provision that is more accessible and appealing to marginalised groups. This approach helps address people’s health challenges within local communities, encouraging peers to share their experiences and create support groups. Micro-funded groups can complement health provision by promoting local community action to support people with common

conditions. This approach supports people over 50 with a wide range of physical and mental health challenges to partly self-manage their conditions, reducing their reliance on the National Health Service (NHS).

“You're not running to the doctor or a physiotherapist... you can take ownership of your own life, and make it social as well... I haven't been to the doctor since I started doing Pilates. He's noticed a big improvement in my overall health. I've taken ownership of my own health, which is what the NHS is encouraging people to do.” (Participant)

2.2.3 Sustainability

Groups can often sustain micro-funded activity as it is small scale. Many projects receiving an initial micro-investment through Ageing Better are sustained, either by project leads applying for funding from other sources, generating income or by participants self-funding groups. These approaches are discussed below:

Sustaining projects through alternative funding sources

Larger micro-funded projects run by organisations (rather than individuals) are more likely to be sustained through applying for funding from an alternative funding source. Smaller groups (run by individuals) are sometimes not constituted, which can limit their ability to apply for further funding. However, some projects (such as Leicester Ageing Together, LAT), are using staff expertise to support groups to become constituted, developing their skills and increasing their ability to apply for funding.

- Some projects funded by Small Funds in Leeds are accessing further funding from national sources such as the Henry Smith grant, as well as local sources, such as the Horsforth Live at Home scheme. One project, which supports local people to do woodwork, has been awarded a grant to deliver activities as part of the Leeds Suicide Prevention programme.
- Leicester has secured a £5,000 local authority grant to continue its micro-funding activities as part of a Social Value pilot. In partnership with Adult Social Care, the pilot will test the use of LAT's community connectors, exploring a possible future roll out across the city. Local groups can apply for up to £200 to fund their activities to support people experiencing isolation and loneliness.
- After demonstrating project success, several organisations decided to take on the running costs of groups themselves. For example, following on from a micro-funding project based in an Independent Living Scheme in Cheshire, a Housing Association is funding similar projects involving community based

organisations across all of its shelters and supported housing schemes for at least one year.

"The project has proved to be really valuable for the residents and the local community. The housing association is looking at it as a way of working, in terms of being more community involved and community-based... linking up with more community organisations... Now all of our shelters and supported housing schemes are working along the same lines." (Project lead)

- Several projects are looking at **income generation** to support sustainability, such as a furniture making project in Cheshire, which is generating funding for its initial host, a wildlife charity. This group is becoming a **social enterprise**.

"This has got a purpose to it, it's got an end-product to it, we all share in the success of it. It becomes much more than the individuals and I think that's what's really nice about it." (Volunteer)

Self-sustaining projects

Smaller-scale projects (often receiving funding up to £1,000) have become self-sustaining as **participants are willing to contribute to the running costs**. Building in a weekly contribution from the start encourages participants to take ownership of the group and become used to making contributions. One micro-funded project initiated this to build up reserves, to help continue the project once the micro-funded period came to an end.

"Right from day one we recognised there was a need to charge a fee... and people have accepted that they make a contribution." (Project lead)

Ownership of activities initially developed through micro-funding can also be strengthened by establishing a **social enterprise**, empowering local people to lead activity in the longer term. For example, a micro-funding investment in a wildlife charity provided seed funding to equip a workshop and train volunteers to design and create bespoke furniture to sell at market rates. The profits are re-invested, to support the charity's conservation work⁸.

⁸ The paid manager role remains an important feature of this model: co-ordinating marketing, training and customer liaison functions. Although some volunteers were keen to assist with marketing, a central co-ordination function remained important.

“It’s a social enterprise, it’s volunteering, it’s producing something in support of the [host organisation], creating something from nothing, it has so many appeals... It’s got tremendous potential. What the seed funding has done is provide the opportunity to start it; it’s provided the platform that allowed this to happen... the funding to equip the workshop without which we could have done none of this. So, the tools are paid for, the timber is given, the volunteers produce... it’s a platform on which we can build.” (Volunteer)

Other approaches tested by participant volunteers to sustain their micro-funding activities include **community fundraising** and **corporate sponsorship**.

“Our club secretary has been incredibly active in a fundraising capacity... We got about £95 from Waitrose. Sainsbury’s and Morrison’s have been very generous in giving us prizes we have used in the Christmas prize draw and we’ve [run] a couple of tombolas.” (Participant volunteer/micro-funded group lead)

Some smaller groups have also set up a **constitution** and some are exploring **income generation** opportunities. For example, in Bristol, a creative writing group produces a booklet which is sold at their community centre base, and an arts group is exploring opportunities to provide services to local schools and care homes.

Bristol

An art group initially supported through the Kick-Start Fund are now self-sustaining. They have secured free meeting space at a local community arts venue known as the ‘scrap store’. The group stocked up on arts materials during the funding period, enabling them to continue now the funding has come to an end. The group teach each other, exchanging their art skills. Members pay a small fee which pays for refreshments and enables the group to build up a small pot to support their longer-term sustainability. They have also developed a constitution to assist with further development.

“We did a constitution last year, we attended a couple of seminars, how to do it, and from that we created a constitution, about how we would like to progress in future... One idea is working with [older] people in the community... we did two school projects...which was a precursor to what we intend to do later on... we are looking to spreading out.” (Participant volunteer/micro-funded group lead)

To support sustainability, groups setting up a constitution formalise their structure to some extent. Group leaders work with their peers to agree **roles and responsibilities**, encouraging people with relevant skills to fulfil key functions.

"I don't think you can avoid [becoming a constituted group] if you want it to sustain. You have to have a management structure rather than a committee structure; you have to have [volunteers] who are going to maintain the formalities of various roles. I approached people with the appropriate skills set and experience." (Participant volunteer/micro-funded group lead)

Several partnerships have linked up with local business to secure **free venues** to help sustain micro-funded activities. Ageless Thanet has been able to link up its Community Fund with its Age-Friendly business scheme, to help secure venues for groups. In exchange for free venues, businesses benefit from the group participants spending money in their venues. In Torbay, groups are also meeting in local cafés free-of-charge.

In Leicester, the local authority provides free venues, training and funding advice for micro-funded groups through its Social Value pilot.

Research into Bristol's Kick-Start activities found that the majority of funded projects were sustained beyond the funding period. However, the research found that not having enough participants and not charging participants were two key reasons why 19 projects (out of 71) could not be sustained⁹.

2.2.4 Challenges for commissioners

Devolving responsibility and accountability

The requirement for evidence-based practice has made some commissioners cautious about using micro-funding. However, third sector funders are increasingly seeing the potential of this relatively new investment approach, with key funders such as TNLCF, and Comic Relief piloting micro-funding investments. For example, TNLCF allocated funding to test micro-funding, which led to changes in its application procedures and monitoring requirements to encourage organisations to apply. For Ageing Better, TNLCF agreed that micro-funding participants do not need to complete the standard Common Measurement Framework (designed to collect demographics and outcomes data)¹⁰. Instead, qualitative data captures the reach and local benefits from micro-funding activity. This approach to data collection enables micro-funding to reach

⁹ Bristol Ageing Better. 2018. *The new and improved Kick-Start Fund: Changes we've made in 2018.*

¹⁰ <https://ageingbetter.ecorys.org.uk/Information>

smaller community organisations and un-constituted groups, and work with more marginalised and unrepresented groups¹¹.

Constituted verses un-constituted groups

A key challenge for TNLCF centres on the funding of un-constituted groups. In Northern Ireland, TNLCF adapted their processes so they can fund un-constituted groups. A work-around was achieved by awarding the funding to a third party organisation, such as a Residents Association, to administer on behalf of the community group leading the micro-funding activity.

“A number of those groups were un-constituted. We can’t fund un-constituted groups, but we needed to find a way of funding them, so funding through a sponsor organisation.” (Head of Knowledge and Learning, TNLCF, Northern Ireland).

¹¹ The limitations of this data collection approach are discussed in the Method note accompanying this report.



Critical Friends decision making panel, Bury, Greater Manchester

3.0 Micro-funding approaches

3.1 Micro-funding models supported by Ageing Better

Ageing Better partnerships are testing diverse approaches to initiate local action through micro-funding¹². Some partnerships provide small micro-funding pots alongside core projects to plug gaps, whereas other partnerships integrate it with their existing community development work. The diagram below shows the variety of Ageing Better micro-funding models.

Size	Funding amount	Application and delivery	Level of support
Small scale	Up to £250	Led by individuals or small groups (un-constituted)	Limited support from paid staff or local charities to get groups up and running
Medium scale	Between £251 and £10,000	Led by groups of people over 50 (un-constituted or constituted)	Limited support from paid staff to address specific need (e.g. sourcing additional equipment, sustainability planning)
Larger scale	Over £10,000	Managed by community organisation, but activities led by people over 50 (constituted)	Paid area coordinators lead networking activities and community consultations to inform bids, liaise with commissioning panels led by people over 50, provide capacity building support for group leaders and coordinate delivery in their area. Peer network support also available (from other micro-funded organisations).

¹² Responses to the Ecorys call for evidence on micro-funding (2018) revealed that Greater Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol, Cheshire, Leeds, Leicester, Middlesbrough, Sheffield, East Lindsey, Hackney and Torbay are operating micro-funding projects, using a variety of approaches.

Micro-funding models adopted by Ageing Better partnerships are influenced by the local context. In areas with a relatively good infrastructure (such as existing community groups or venues), micro-funding approaches encourage organisations or local people to apply to deliver a specific project. For example, in Cheshire, local organisations can apply for up to £20,000 from the ‘Bright Ideas’ pot to deliver projects for between one and two years.

Some micro-funding projects help organisations build on their core work to reach lonely or socially isolated people aged over 50. The ‘Small Funds’ project, part of Leeds Time to Shine programme, adopted this approach.

“We wanted to build the capacity of the third sector to reach more socially isolated people in their communities, because they’ve all got core work, but if you’ve got limited amounts of money you might only be able to get to the people who are able to get to your premises, but this extra money helps them to get out there and find the most isolated people and do more work.” (Partnership lead)

In contrast, other micro-funding projects are rooted in wider community development, but separate to Ageing Better partnerships’ core commissioned work. For example, the ‘Start Up Squad’ project (part of Age Better in Sheffield) is run by Ignite Imaginations, which places paid staff in community ‘hubs’¹³ to support local people to co-develop ideas for community groups. Project staff spend three to six months supporting people to set up their own groups, which is supplemented with up to £200 to cover start-up costs (such as insurance or equipment).

“So the micro-funding is really small, it’s part of the start-up offer. It’s about getting people to the point where they are able to deliver their own group.” (Partnership lead)

Other partnerships’ micro-funding approaches are designed to build the capacity of local communities to develop their own groups, in the context of limited local infrastructure. For example, Ambition for Ageing in Greater Manchester have eight Local Delivery Leads, who galvanise action at the grassroots level and use micro-funding on a discretionary basis to develop communities and grassroots groups so that they can comfortably and confidently manage micro-funds. This also has the longer-term benefit of developing community capability and capacity.

¹³ ‘Hubs’ are frequently-used community venues.

*"The motivation or enthusiasm of someone else saying to me 'actually that's a very good idea, you put in a great bid'... it focused our efforts considerably."
(Participant volunteer/micro-funded group lead)*

Micro-funding recipients

Micro-funded investments are aimed at a range of different groups. In contrast to traditional funding streams, they can be accessed by individuals and informal groups, as well as established community groups and organisations.

Some Ageing Better areas, including Birmingham, Greater Manchester, Bristol, Sheffield, Leicester and Thanet, specifically fund community groups/citizens to develop their own groups. In some cases, individuals/groups do not need to be constituted to apply for funding. For example, groups of friends and neighbours can access the Ageing Better Fund in Birmingham if they form a new network to propose an activity. Here, a member of staff called a 'Network Enabler' helps to develop the groups and supports them to write the application for micro-funds. Network Enablers ensure micro-funding processes works efficiently, by supporting local people to develop the skills and confidence to set up and lead activities themselves.

In contrast the 'Step Up' pot in East Lindsey only provided funding to constituted groups. The project team supported interested un-constituted groups to link up with locally constituted groups, to apply on their behalf. This approach worked well because it helped to forge new links between different community groups.

Other partnerships micro-funding is open to individuals and organisations. For example, the underlying aspiration for Cheshire's 'Bright Ideas' pot is to build on existing community assets.

*"It was seen as an opportunity to do asset-based work, it was about encouraging the community to come forward with ideas... anyone from established third sector providers, through private sector providers, through community groups, through to one man and his dog who had an idea to do something in his local community."
(Project lead)*

Project size and duration

The table overleaf summarises the overall Ageing Better investment in micro-funding, and indicates project numbers, duration and award values by partnership.

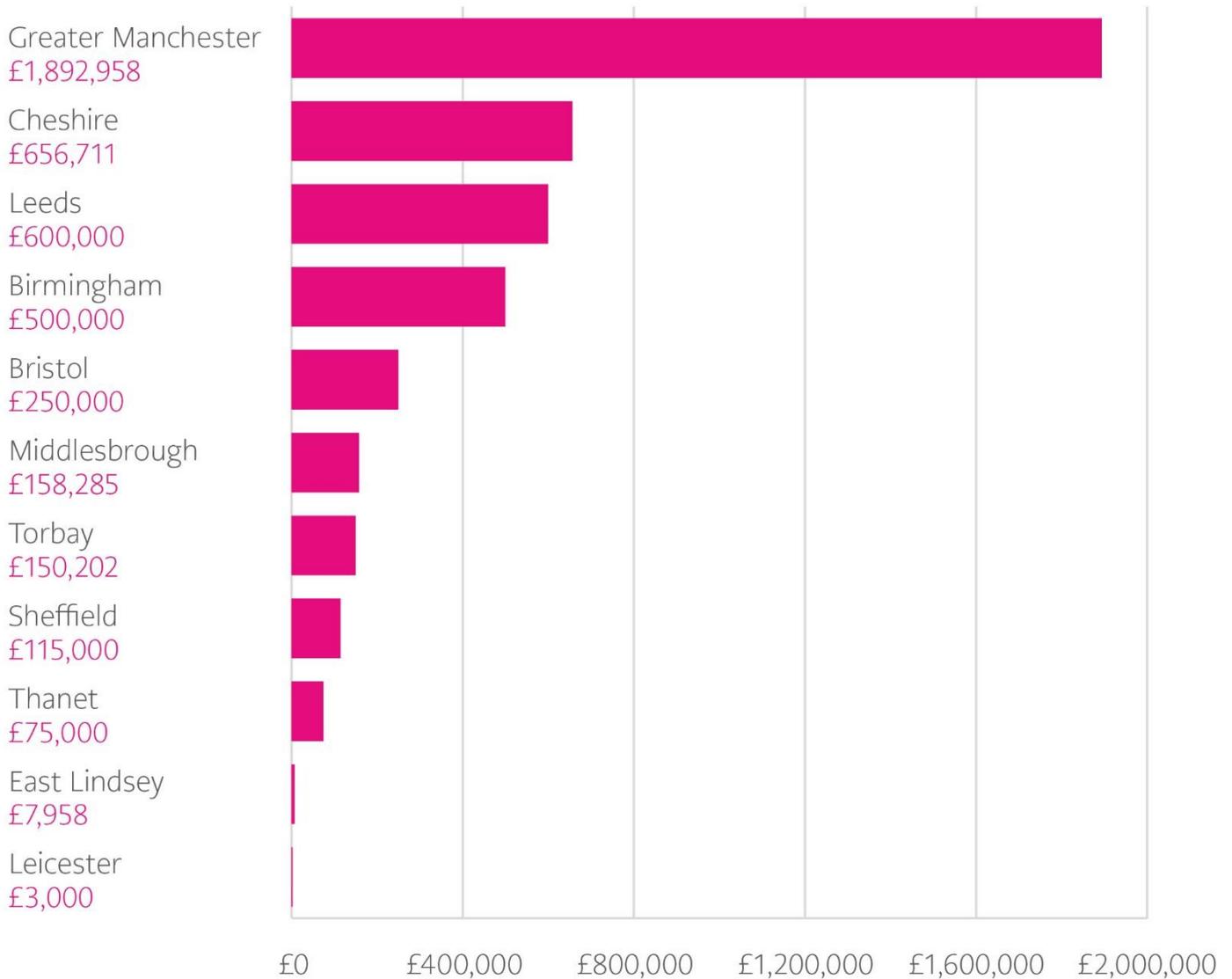
Partnership area	Amount and proportion of total funding received, allocated to micro-funding	Number of micro-funding awards made to date (end of August 2019)	Length of micro-funding awards	Range of awards (individual micro-funding award amounts)
Birmingham	£500,000 (8%)	241	Up to 6 months	£50 - £2,000
Bristol	£250,000 (4%)	142	8 weeks up to a year	£120 - £2,000
Cheshire	£656,711 (13%)	43	12 months to 24 months	Up to £20,000
East Lindsey	£7,958 (<1%)	5	Average 6 months	£800 - £2,500
Greater Manchester	£1,892,958 (18%)	1,248	1 day to a year	£51 - £2,000
Leeds	£600,000 (10%)	56	7 months to 2 years	£4,850 - £19,968
Leicester	£3,000 (<1%)	12	1 day	£250
Middlesbrough	£158,285 (3%)	54	1 day to 4 years	Up to £31,200
Sheffield	£115,000 (2%)	90	3 to 6 months	£20 - £200
Thanet	£75,000 (2%)	77	6 to 12 months	£125 - £3,128
Torbay	£150,202 (3%)	8	Up to a year	£5,735 - £25,000
TOTALS	£4,409,114 (7%)	1,976		Range is from £20 - £31,200

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¹⁴ In Sheffield, local people running micro-funding projects typically receive support from Ignite Imaginations (the organisation delivering the service) for 3-6 months, but the award does not need to be spent within that time period (the grant is not specifically time-bound). Sheffield Deep Dive Report (2018).

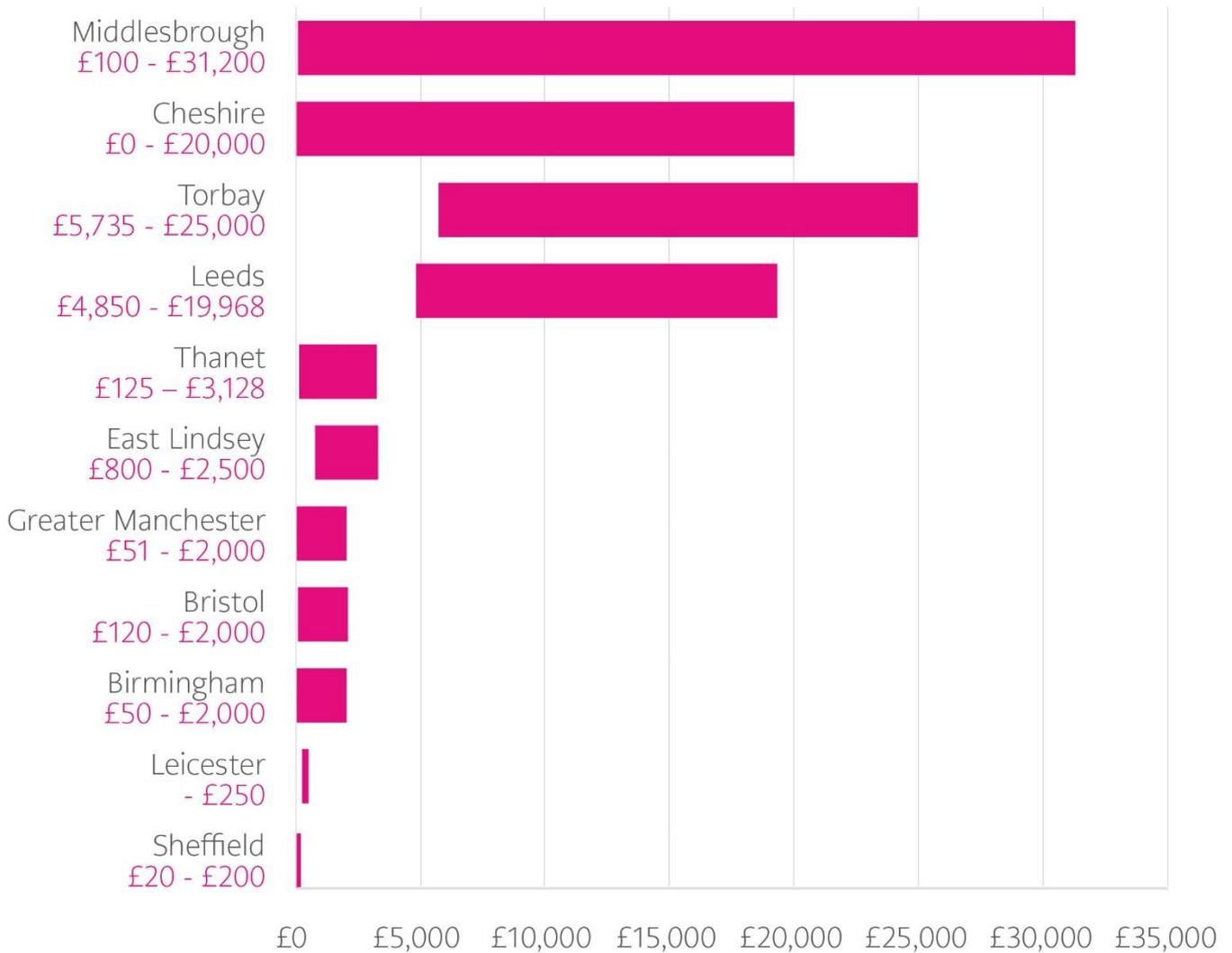
Micro-funding amounts from Ageing Better

Figure 1 Funding amounts per partnership



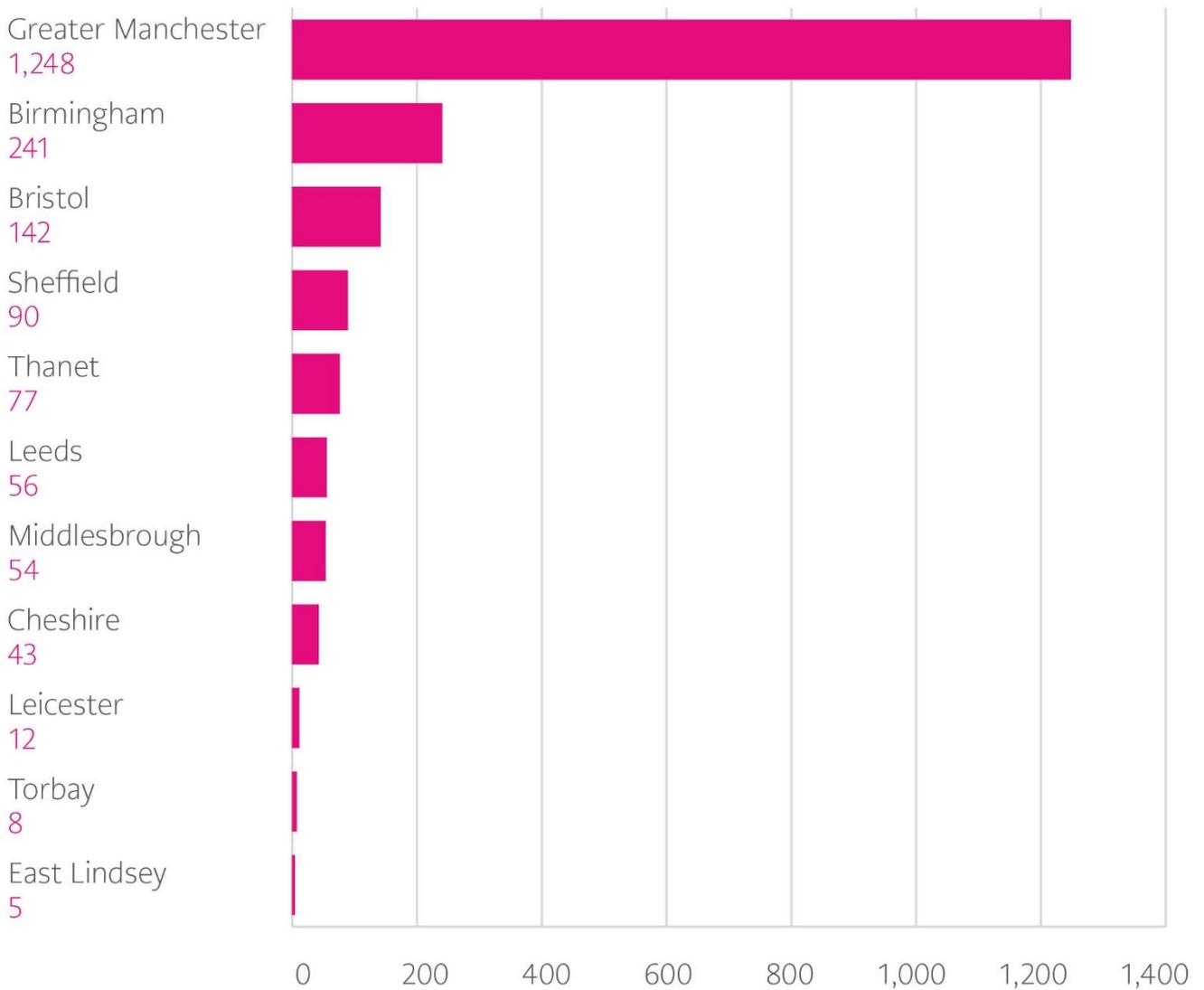
The size of Ageing Better partnerships' individual micro-funding pots vary considerably. The following graph illustrates the range of micro-funding amounts awarded to individual groups/projects.

Figure 2 Range of funding amounts awarded to individual projects



- The largest micro-funding award across the Ageing Better programme so far has been £31,200 (through Middlesbrough’s small projects fund). This investment was delivered over 1 year and 8 months.
- Most micro-funding pots range between £50 and £5,000 and are targeted primarily at small local grassroots organisations or individuals.
- Minimising restrictions on micro-funding spend supports projects to be flexible and responsive to emerging needs. Micro-funding can therefore respond to community needs that larger core projects cannot quickly or easily adapt to. For example, Bright Ideas in Cheshire initially did not set parameters for micro-funding amounts, but the partnership found that this discouraged smaller organisations or individuals from applying. They found more people applied when the set the offer to any amount up to £20,000.

Figure 3 Number of awards made per partnership



- Due to the wide range of investment sizes, there is not a direct correlation between the level of the overall micro-funding investment made by a partnership, and the number of projects funded.

Associated support

Several partnerships offered assistance to groups in addition to their main micro-funding pots.

- Several partnerships allowed staff members to offer discretionary funds to local community members. In Middlesbrough, community groups can apply for a small amount of funding from the Community Development Activity Team fund. If successful, staff purchase goods and services on behalf of the community groups. In Torbay, there is Community Builder Activity, where ‘Community Builder’ staff provide short-term small amounts of finance to get activities off the ground and/or expand activities already working well in the community¹⁵.
- Some projects do not offer a specific investment amount; this is either because the community development staff leading these projects have discretion over how to spend the money (as in Ambition for Ageing in Greater Manchester) or because there is no money to offer, as is the case in Leicester Ageing Together (LAT). In Leicester, a ‘Community Connector’ project supports local groups (using an Asset Based Community Development, ABCD, approach). Here, Community Connectors help groups develop their capacity to apply for - and make use of - existing non-Ageing Better micro-funds (such as the Royal Voluntary Service’s ‘Bring People Together’ funding, or specific ward funding).

Investment periods

The length of micro-funding investments varies. Many partnerships anticipate micro-funding projects will become self-sustaining (at least in some form). The points below show variations in the investment period.

- Some micro-funded projects were one-off events, usually to celebrate an occasion. For example, in 2017, to celebrate the International Day for Older People¹⁶, LAT (Leicester) dispersed twelve £250 grants to organisations to run

¹⁵ These activities have been omitted from the funding table, as the number of awards made is unknown. However, Middlesbrough’s Community Development Activity Team fund was allocated £251,000 over six years, and Torbay has distributed £45,420 this way.

¹⁶ The 1st of October is Older People’s Day, which coincides with the UN International Day of Older Persons. Dementia Action Alliance website https://www.dementiaaction.org.uk/news/13944_5_things_you_can_do_to_celebrate_older_peoples_day

local events. Similarly, in 2018, Middlesbrough's Faithfully Ageing Better Intergenerational Fund provided ten grants worth up to £500.

- Micro-funded projects that are commissioned separately to partnerships' core programmes tend to have a specific timeframe, which is usually between six months to two years.
- Projects embedded in community development work tend not to have specific timeframes. The focus is on building the capacity of local community members to develop and deliver their own groups. This means project staff need to work flexibly, depending on community needs. The process of building individuals' skills and confidence to develop their micro-funding proposals and pitch for investments is as important as building their capacity to organise and deliver activities.

Investment purpose

Given the range of investment amounts, the way that that the funding is spent varies substantially. Micro-funding pots in the region of £200 to £250 typically cover the costs associated with starting up a group. Such costs include equipment hire or purchase, insurance, initial marketing or initial venue hire. Often the aspiration behind offering small investments is to help local people/groups start something new, with the view to them becoming self-sustaining.

"We'll give upfront funding, for.... maybe six weeks, three months, whatever it is that we think is needed. Until the point at which there are so many people involved in it, that they're all just giving a little bit and then it can just be covered by their own contribution. So, we never give out more than £250 to any one group, and we need to know when we do that, that there is a chance that actually it will be sustainable." (Partnership lead)

Many micro-funds are used to test new approaches to reach marginalised groups. Projects use larger scale awards (ranging from £5,000 to £25,000) for a variety of purposes. Often, larger funding amounts pay for staff to manage the initiative. For example, one project funded by Small Funds in Leeds has a paid 'volunteer co-ordinator', who works on the project one day a week and has a key role in supporting volunteers; providing training and acting as a first point-of-contact for safeguarding concerns. Other projects use micro-funding to pay for transport to and from venues, to purchase refreshments, to buy equipment or raw materials (for example in craft-based projects) or bring in a freelancer or tradesperson to support the activity.

3.2 Organising micro-funding

Commissioning and developing projects

Micro-investments have funded a wide range of activities through Ageing Better including: music, film, arts and crafts; communication; conservation and horticulture; cooking and food sharing; mental and physical activity and wellbeing; transport and befriending; skills sharing and intergenerational work. Projects range from one-off community events through to multi-annual activities.

Micro-funding often starts with community development work; reaching out to local residents through consultations or awareness raising activities. Local people are supported (often by paid staff) to build their ideas into project plans and complete applications for funding. The applications are reviewed by a panel of local people who decide which projects to invest in, following the funding criteria. Micro-funding activities have been commissioned in this way across Ageing Better.

For example, the ‘Small Funds’ project in Leeds, Thanet’s ‘Community Fund’ and ‘Bright Ideas’ in Cheshire have held commissioning ‘rounds’. Applying ‘test and learn’ principles, partnerships have adapted their commissioning processes along the way. The ‘Small Funds’ project has focused commissioning rounds on different themes and tested funding projects for one and two years. These themes (dementia and carers; men; relationships and transport) are addressing local needs and complement larger core commissioned projects¹⁷.

Community outreach work helps to stimulate local action. In some partnerships, paid staff support local people to develop their ideas into groups or activities that can be funded. This is the case for Sheffield’s ‘Start Up Squads’ and in Leicester (LAT).

"It's not like people come to [the project staff], with an idea; [the project staff] go out and help people to develop that idea in the first place." (Partnership lead)

Delivery staff also provide support to people over 50 indicating interest in developing a project. For example, as part of the ‘Step Up Commissioning Pot’ process, a paid staff member from the Talk, Eat, Drink (T.E.D.) partnership in East Lindsey undertook

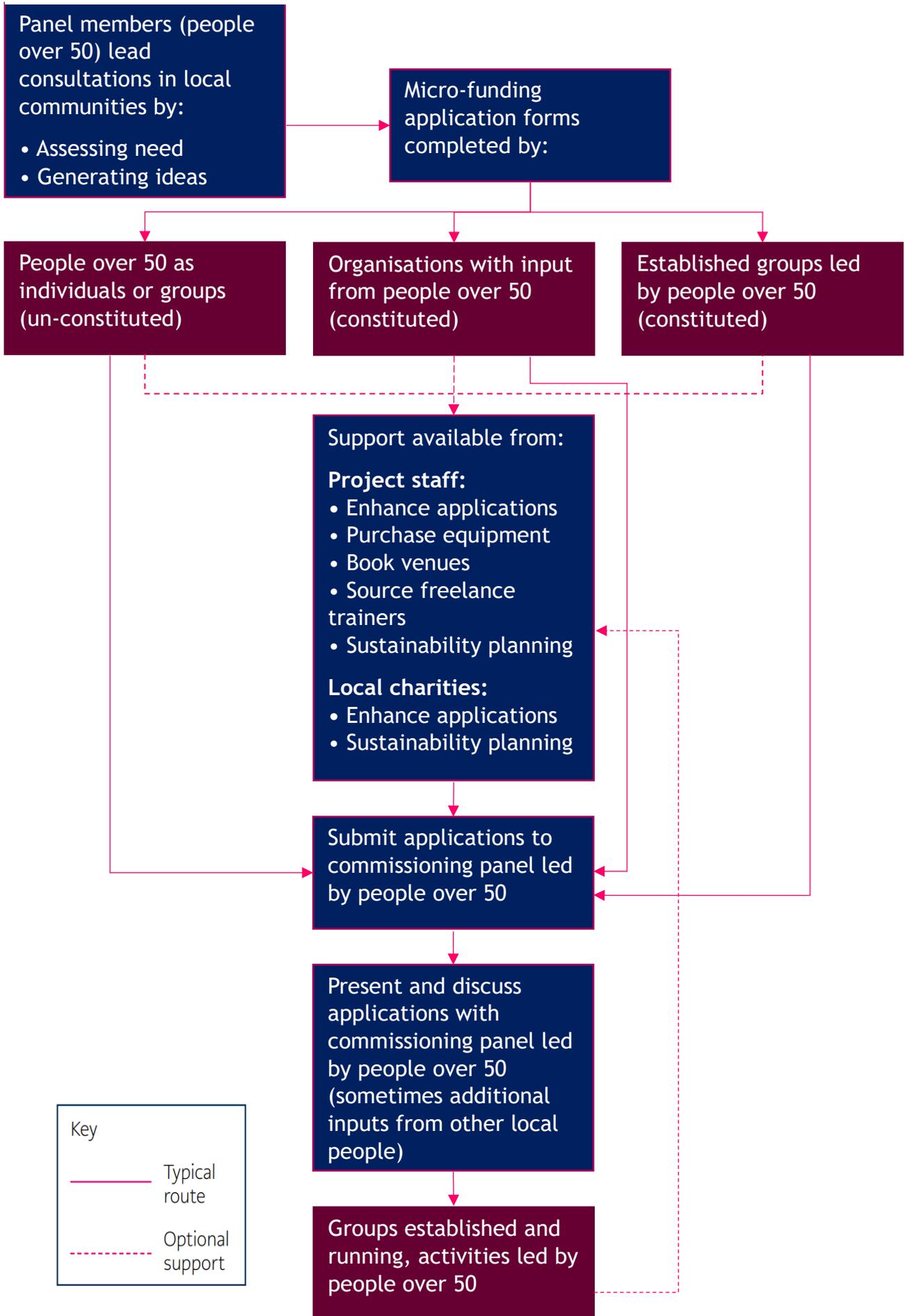
¹⁷ The Small Funds project initially focused commissioning rounds 1-6 on different themes. Rounds 7-11 had an open theme, which brought a wider variety of projects into the Fund. Further information: <https://timetoshineleeds.org/projects/small-funds>

'health checks' to identify suitable groups for micro-funding. Similarly, as part of Birmingham's Ageing Better Fund, Hub staff support groups to complete micro-funding application forms, find providers to deliver activities, and help groups set up monitoring processes. In Cheshire, decision making panel members held focus groups and coffee mornings in community venues to consult local people.

"We also did a lot of asset management, looking at what was already in a village, so you weren't actually going to be in competition with someone else. I think the secret is talking to the people [over 50] themselves." (Decision maker micro-funding)

The diagram overleaf summarises the typical process people over 50 take to develop micro-funded projects and highlights the optional support available.

Figure 4 The micro-funding application process and optional support



Micro-funding in action: commissioning

Ageing Better partnerships support people over 50 to commission micro-funding projects. People over 50 lead commissioning decisions, using their skills, experience and knowledge of their communities to select projects (according to criteria set by partnership staff and volunteers). For example, Bristol's Kick-Start Fund panel comprises seven people aged over 50, each of whose scoring of bids is equal to the one set of scores provided by programme management team staff¹⁸. Birmingham's co-production cohort, the Age of Experience Group, sit on the panel which decide which applications are funded.

Partnerships set eligibility criteria to guide the decision making process and ensure consistency and fairness¹⁹, for example by requiring that applicants must be aged over 50 and have lived experience of the issues they aim to address (as in Greater Manchester). Community organisations applying for micro-funding through Ageing Better are expected to directly consult people over 50 in the development of the bid. Decision making panels sometimes invite applicants to present their ideas. People over 50 play a key role in these interviews, ensuring the micro-funding is addressing community need.

Micro-funding is based on a person-centred approach, to meet the needs of local people. Taking a community-led approach generates greater diversity than traditional commissioning approaches led by practitioners.

“The success of this is the range and diversity of groups that have been set up, things that we would have never commissioned in a million years, because we wouldn't have known the need for that particular community, and we wouldn't have known about how to commission a particular group. But actually, leaving it to communities to decide what's needed has worked really well.” (Partnership lead)

Engaging people aged over 50 on decision making panels (such as the Kick-Start Fund panel in Bristol, the Bright Ideas panel in Cheshire, and in Greater Manchester) is a key feature of asset-based approaches. Often, panel members are residents of the

¹⁸ Bristol Ageing Better. 2018. *The new and improved Kick-Start Fund: Changes we've made in 2018.*

¹⁹ibid.

communities that will benefit from the micro-funding activities, so their insights help to ensure that projects support age-friendly activities.

"The decisions are made by the committee... it is very much our decision making, and [the project staff] don't steer our decision making. They are able to provide extra information if we don't have it, but I feel as though we are really empowered to make the decisions." (Decision maker micro-funding)

Thanet

The Community Fund panel brings together people over 50. Project staff provide training to empower the panel to be confident in undertaking their commissioning role. The panel assess the bids and decide which bids should be funded. They can also suggest unsuccessful applicants for support from project staff to improve their applications. Peer support is a key feature within the panel.

"We were all of one mind... We all respected each other... Our task was to go through all the applications and sort out those that were suitable and filled the criteria... staff didn't sit in on the actual assessment of the bid." (Decision maker micro-funding)

People over 50 applying for micro-funding through Ageing Better found the support from project staff invaluable in preparing their applications.

"[They] briefly explained what it was all about, and I found that starting the new club... was easy to do... We had very encouraging and positive feedback from them, and a huge amount of help... actually getting the funding through and directing it into the place we wanted it." (Participant volunteer/micro-funded group lead)

"I decided I would like to set up a group. With [my social prescriber's] help, and some funding from Ageing Better which we were able to use for hiring room space to meet, we produced our first booklet." (Participant volunteer/micro-funded group lead)

Some Ageing Better decision making panels interview applicants before awarding the grant, whilst others opt for an informal discussion.

"We made the written bid and then I went along for a fairly informal chat with [the project team]. We went through it and I explained the sport... the reasons

*behind it. We found them very supportive, very helpful... they were great."
(Participant volunteer/micro-funded group lead)*

Paid staff and volunteers on decision making panels can also support people over 50 to enhance their application in some cases, to build the capacity of local people to develop their own groups.

"A member of staff would go along and talk to them about ways to tidy up their application." (Decision maker micro-funding)

"We have that flexibility, if you've got people who know a bit about bid writing, they can go back to the bidders and help them to do it a bit better... putting their case properly... you know what they are trying to do, and they're not putting it down right to meet the criteria." (Decision maker micro-funding)

Top tips for providers supporting people to set up micro-funding activities

At the commissioning stage:

- Arrange consultation events to explore local needs and aspirations, and explain the opportunity
- Line up support from local VCS umbrella organisations to assist with the application process
- Establish a decision making panel made up of people over 50
- Ensure the application process is straightforward, using plain English
- Encourage applicants to involve local people over 50 in the interview, to demonstrate need
- Provide opportunities for applicants to enhance their applications following feedback from the decision making panel (if necessary)

Micro-funding in action: project delivery

Based on ABCD approaches, micro-funding engages a diverse range of people over 50 in co-developing and co-designing activities. Micro-funding provides a forum for local people who are confident and sociable, to engage other people (who might be lonely or socially isolated). Micro-funded projects are often supported by paid staff, volunteers and participant volunteers.

Wraparound support

Larger micro-funded projects, which are commissioned out to organisations (rather than individuals) are often co-ordinated by a paid staff member, who is supported by volunteers. Projects that require volunteer support (such as befriending projects), usually need a paid staff role to oversee tasks like volunteer training, administrative duties and safeguarding. Delivery staff can help projects get up and running, and co-ordinate initial activities. This support empowers people over 50 to build their confidence to eventually lead groups themselves. By encouraging people to take gradual control of groups, they become more invested in sustaining it.

“A lot of the work involves getting alongside people, getting to know them, listening to what they're saying. Then connecting what they're saying with - ‘oh well, that already exists, it's here’, or, ‘oh that's a good idea’ and listening to see if anybody else is coming up with the same idea, and then putting those people together so that they can make it happen.” (Project staff)

People over 50 are the decision makers, with paid staff providing administrative and financial support, empowering (participant) volunteers to focus on getting their activities up and running. For example, paid staff purchase equipment and hire venues selected by the (participant) volunteers.

“They were very good in letting us point out what we wanted... We sourced [the equipment] and pointed them specifically at where we wanted them to get it from... The fact that they were willing to go to our preferred supplier to buy our preferred grade of equipment was much appreciated... Now we have kit that's still in use a year and a half later that's still as good as new.” (Participant volunteer/micro-funded group lead)

Outreach staff, meeting and talking to people in local neighbourhoods, enhances project reach. This approach takes time, as outreach staff embed themselves in communities to build rapport and trust with local people. Once established, outreach staff can build the capacity of local people to develop their own groups.

“I think the success of what we've been doing is our actual contact, making eye contact with people - getting involved, being there and encouraging other people to get involved. Being there for people as well when they think, ‘oh this is going to fall apart’, and then you get some other people involved and then it happens and it starts growing...that way people start to gain confidence.” (Project staff)

"There were a lot of good ideas out there, but people couldn't get the funding for it. We could see we could spread the jam more thinly, but also get more out of it, doing different projects. The idea was, you come to us and tell us what you want to do, so that the ideas come from the community, not top down." (Decision maker micro-funding)

Marketing projects through existing links and community assets extends the reach of micro-funded activities. For example, in Birmingham, paid community development workers called 'Network Enablers' recruit socially isolated and/or lonely people by making contact with people in community centres, churches, libraries and supermarkets. Projects in other areas put flyers in local GP services. Several projects in Cheshire reached people over 50 successfully by advertising in a community magazine for local residents.

Some **established local organisations** can reach into communities and may already know lonely or socially isolated people needing support. For example, one organisation working with carers aged over 50 already had a database of carers who might be experiencing social isolation or loneliness, enabling them to reach out to these people directly.

In rural areas people are often socially isolated because of the lack of transport infrastructure. Micro-funded projects might need to **invest in transport** to reach the most socially isolated. Some Ageing Better micro-projects have linked up with local services. (In Cheshire, for example, a 'Dial-a-ride' service provides door-to-door assistance for people who cannot use public transport).

(Participant) volunteering opportunities

Ageing Better facilitates a range of person-centred, asset-based approaches through micro-funding:

- Projects that develop from ABCD approaches tend to be led by participant volunteers, sometimes supported by paid staff for a short period (between three and six months) to get activities up and running. This support includes purchasing equipment and booking venues.
- Some projects only involve volunteers. For example, in one micro-funded project in Cheshire, run by a wildlife charity, volunteers create bespoke furniture to individual order out of reclaimed wood, to raise funds for the charity.

- As micro-funding supports a people-centred approach, participants tend to be more invested because they have either helped design the project or have a voice in shaping delivery. Over time, participants' confidence builds up and some feel empowered to take the lead by volunteering for the group. Many stakeholders could not identify any barriers to generating volunteer-led activity in a micro-funding context.
- Some groups are led and organised by people over 50. For example, in Thanet, individuals have taken on groups at risk of closure and revitalised them into flourishing activities.

Partnerships are supporting participants to become volunteers, to help sustain activities.

Cheshire

The 'Bright Ideas' fund in Cheshire supports a craft-based project, where group members make bespoke furniture to order from reclaimed wood, to raise money for the charity. The group members see themselves as volunteers providing a service.

"They very much see themselves as volunteers, coming to do something for us, and we found that worked well, particularly the guys [over 50]... If you invite them to some sort of social thing, they'll usually say 'I'm fine thanks'... They don't like being recipients of what they see as charity. Whereas if you ask them for a hand in something, they jump on it right away, they want to feel purposeful, and useful." (Project lead)

"It's given me a sense of purpose and an escape, I suffer with a lot of pain... It makes me realise I'm still a person of value. It shows my weaknesses and my strengths." (Participant volunteer)

Micro-funding aligns well with **social prescribing** approaches, which enables medical professionals to refer people into local, non-clinical services and community activities. Because micro-funding is small-scale, it can create inclusive activities, led by local people, which can be less daunting to some people than established clubs and societies. Micro-funding can therefore support social prescribing by offering enhanced local activities for referral, and also provides opportunities for social prescribers to support local people wishing to set up their own groups.

[The social prescriber] was there to support and guide... She organised the room, took charge of the funding for us, so I didn't have to worry about it, so I could focus on the creative writing side of it... [She] very much gave me the reins and

said 'go in and do it.' It was very much me making decisions and being responsible... I know she was there, but she wasn't always obviously there, if you know what I mean, it is about guiding people, giving them a shove and saying 'come on, you can do it!'. Which is what I needed at the time." (Participant volunteer/micro-funded group lead)

Once established, some micro-funding projects are entirely led by people over 50.

"It gives you more freedom to learn from each other and express yourself... Most of us are over 50, so we don't need to be led by anybody, we're capable of making decisions...We talk a lot, there isn't anyone being bossy so it's a good group." (Participant volunteer/micro-funded group lead)

"Some are self-financing and volunteers are running them" (Decision maker micro-funding)

A minority of Ageing Better micro-funded groups have developed a **constitution** to further their activities. Having a constitution enables groups to manage their own funds.

Thanet

Ageless Thanet runs a wide range of wellbeing courses which are delivered for eight weeks. To build capacity, some participants are asked if they would like to volunteer to continue the sessions for the community. Four volunteers took over the running of the Boccia group, appointing a treasurer and secretary²⁰. The lead volunteer went on a course with Boccia England and qualified as a referee, as participants were taking the game seriously, with some keen to play in national competitions. The group formed the Thanet Thunderers Boccia Club, and now runs two sessions. Participants contribute subs to the club's social fund, which are collected by the treasurer and used to provide refreshments and any surplus helps to pay for equipment. The club has formed a constitution so they can fundraise to support their activities and grow the group. The group was recently voted Boccia

²⁰ Boccia (pronounced bot-cha) is a Paralympic sport, similar to bowls. The game is played on a flat, smooth surface, usually indoors, on a court the size of a badminton court. Boccia was originally designed for people with Cerebral Palsy but is now played by people with a wide range of disabilities. Boccia England website.

<https://www.bocciaengland.org.uk/what-is-boccia>

Club of the Year by Boccia England, which recognised the contribution of inspirational volunteers to the club's success²¹.

"We have a club treasurer whose an ex-accountant... He produces accounts for the club and looks after our bank accounts... We hand-picked some quite capable [volunteers] to help us along. Our club secretary is an ex-headmistress... Apart from acting as secretary at meetings, she also looks after some of the formal tasks such as calling the AGM²² and running the AGM... it is her responsibility to handle any formal and legal stuff which comes through." (Participant volunteer/micro-funded group lead)

"Most of us have skills and have worked where we've organised things or have done finances on committees, so we're all quite competent people." (Participant volunteer/micro-funded group lead)

Top tips for providers supporting people to set up micro-funding activities

At the project delivery stage:

- Maintain a central coordination role for a paid staff member for larger projects
- Organise venue hire for smaller groups, at least initially
- Source freelance trainers if specialist skills are needed to run the activity
- Identify any tradespeople needed to customise the activity space
- Arrange periodic support visits from the decision making panel
- Signpost to support from VCS umbrella organisations to help groups grow and formalise their constitution (if necessary)

Micro-funding is distinct from traditional grant-making programmes

Ageing Better partnerships identified the following distinctions between micro-funding and larger programmes:

- Micro-funding **encourages community-based activity that can be sustained by local people**. Using small-scale, person-centred approaches, local people are creating community driven projects which they have a vested interest in continuing.

²¹ <https://www.bocciaengland.org.uk/news/boccia-england-awards-2019>

²² Annual General Meeting (AGM)

“If you're part of a group and it has value for you, you kind of keep it sustained yourself.” (Partnership lead)

- Micro-funding gives **organisations additional capacity to reach people who are lonely and/or socially isolated**. Several Ageing Better partnerships highlighted that small, grassroots organisations could reach people experiencing loneliness and/or social isolation, but they needed a small amount of funding to run activities for them. The funds required are too small-scale for many grant-making programmes.

Test and Learn: creating solutions for the local context

The Ageing Better programme encourages local people to ‘**test and learn**’, recognising that solutions will vary according to the **local context**. Through co-design, co-production and asset-based dialogue, stakeholders (project leads, practitioners, volunteers and participants) discuss what works, as well as what doesn’t, in building community solutions. The small-scale nature of micro-funding means ideas can be tested in diverse contexts and easily adapted by communities themselves to meet local needs. By testing new approaches in diverse contexts and with different groups, micro-funding enables:

- Organisations to improve their engagement processes and decide whether or not to fund a project as part of its core work; and
- Individuals or un-constituted groups to consider whether to develop a constitution, to enable them to apply for funding or introduce service charges.

Ageing Better partnerships from Birmingham, Thanet, Hackney, Cheshire and Bristol identified the following insights from their test and learn approaches; to enhance their micro-funding work:

Better micro-funding: Improving efficiency through test and learn approaches

Promoting micro-funding:

- Diverse channels help raise awareness: the internet, social media, mailing lists, free local newspapers, radio and television, flyers in community centres, third sector support agencies, and links with key stakeholders including council community development workers and delivery partners.
- Understanding the context for the local area is a crucial factor in making micro-funding attractive and appropriate to potential applicants.

Decision making panels

- Co-production is essential. People from the target demographic for applications should make up a significant proportion of decision making panel members.
- Open rounds encourage applications at any time of year, inspiring people to act on their idea.
- Ensure panel members receive training and support to review applications.
- Decision making panels should regularly review applications (monthly or quarterly). Individual panel members should have at least 10 days to assess applications before discussing them at joint panel meeting.
- Value for money per person should be considered. Costs should be reasonable for the proposed activity.

Application process

- Straightforward guidance helps people complete the application form. Include a jargon buster (to explain terms such as 'sustainability'). Guidance should be easy to understand and clearly state the assessment criteria.
- Ensure you have capacity to answer applicants' queries. Micro-funding applicants may have less previous experience of funding regimes and may therefore need support.
- Clarify whether joint/collaborative applications are encouraged, and if so, whether this affects the level of funding which can be applied for.
- Set a word limit for each answer, to ensure content remains directly relevant. (This also makes the assessment process more manageable for the decision making panel).
- Assessment criteria may involve scoring applications higher if they target priority groups. Applicants should clearly explain *how* they plan to involve these groups.
- Ensure the application is co-produced with the target group. (Applications written by professionals may not resonate with local need).
- Talk to unsuccessful applicants. This can help improve the application process and make it more accessible.

Support

- Successful projects may need support, information and advice about local facilities such as printing and supporting people with complex needs.
- Consider how/if projects will be supported once their funding ends. Sustainability planning should be built into the application, but projects may need signposting to other sources of funding or capacity building courses run by local third sector support agencies.

- Plan whether you will encourage funded projects to collaborate and network
- Consider evaluation options, and how the results can be used to improve future micro-funding rounds²³.

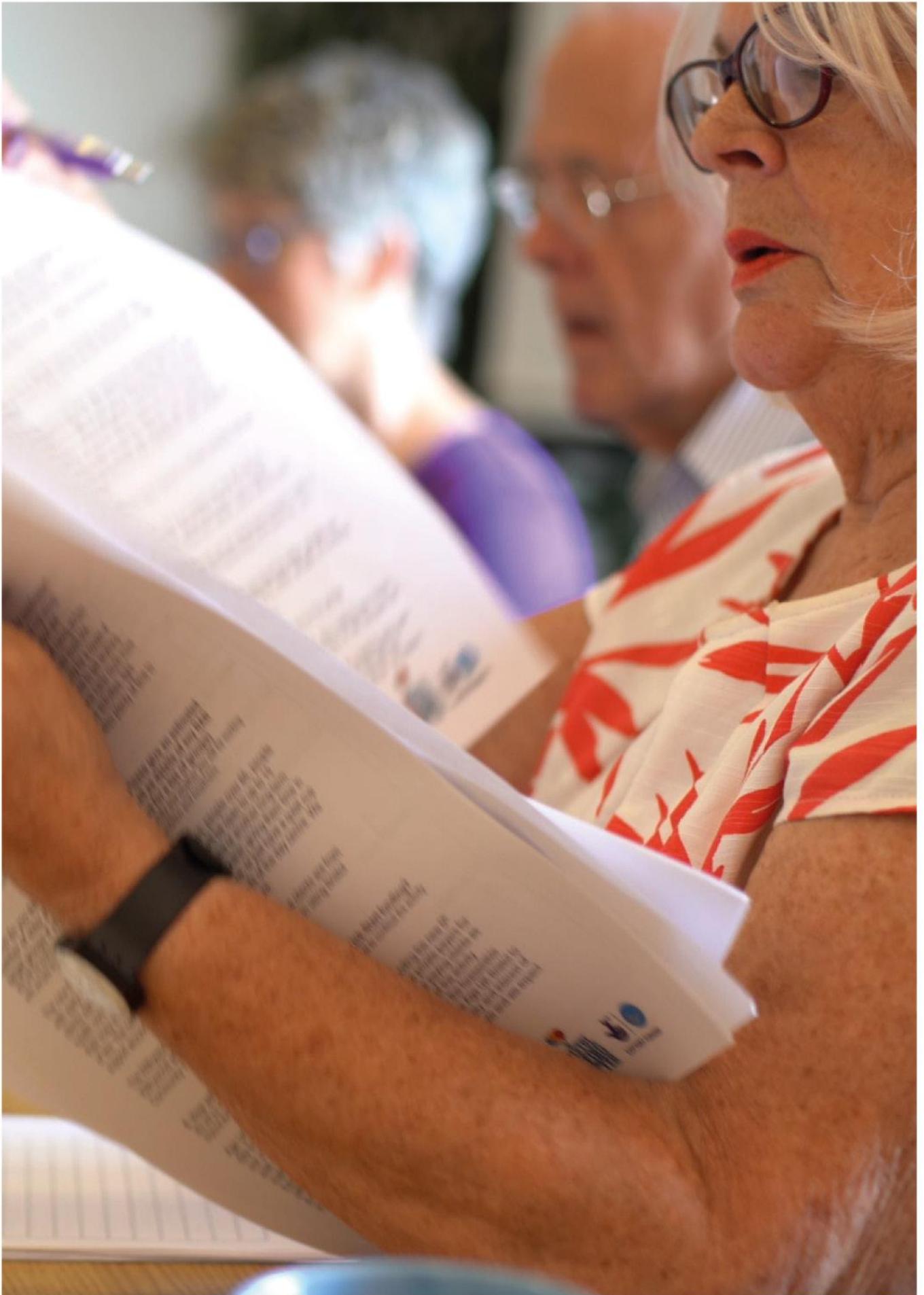
In Bristol, Community Researchers have found it works well to raise awareness about micro-funding opportunities whilst interacting with local people through other community activities.

Micro-funding offers a rich environment to ‘**test and learn**’. These investments are flexible and small-scale so can easily be adapted. Ageing Better micro-funded projects have evolved by changing the micro-funding amounts on offer, introducing opportunities to bid for follow-on funds to diversify or extend activities²⁴, and (participant) volunteer-led change²⁵.

²³ Adapted from Bristol Ageing Better. 2018. *The new and improved Kick-Start Fund: Changes we’ve made in 2018*.

²⁴ Cheshire introduced its ‘Brighter Ideas’ pot, and Bristol established ‘Kick-Start Plus’.

²⁵ For example, Bright Ideas project participants formed a peer support network, which gave them confidence as a group to go out and about. The group evolved from being based in a local community centre, to going on day trips to different local attractions.



Kick-Start Fund decision making panel, Bristol

4.0 Learning so far and looking forward

The Ageing Better programme is generating valuable learning about reaching people over 50 who may be more likely to experience social isolation and/or loneliness through micro-funding. Participants and volunteers are on average less socially isolated and lonely after taking part in Ageing Better, and are keen to reach out to increase participation amongst their peers.

This paper demonstrates how micro-funding approaches empower people over 50 to lead and contribute to both the commissioning and running of activities. These approaches can reach people over 50 at risk of, and those experiencing social isolation and/or loneliness. Key insights featured in this paper include:

- Micro-funded models can be developed to suit local contexts and a range of funding levels; providing opportunities for people over 50 to lead or work alongside paid staff;
- Local people over 50 using and developing their skills and knowledge to commission micro-funded activity, builds local capacity and enhances local opportunities for their peers;
- Micro-funding builds community assets using and enhancing people over 50s confidence, skills and knowledge to run activities for their local community;
- Some micro-funded projects need wrap around support. A central coordinator (often paid staff), can cover management and administration functions for larger projects, and support capacity building activities. Support with outreach, marketing and transport are also important considerations for embedding micro-funded activities in communities. This support empowers local people to develop at their own pace and focus on delivering activities for their peers;
- Micro-funding promotes community ownership; volunteers and participant volunteers lead individual groups, either on a constituted or un-constituted basis (with optional support if needed);
- Micro-funding empowers people over 50 to sustain their own groups through a variety of self-financing, income generating and fundraising initiatives, thereby increasing the longer-term capacity of the local community to self-organise;
- People feel a strong connection to micro-funded activities because they are designed and led by local communities. This approach increases participant

(volunteers) commitment; many are willing to make small contributions to cover the cost of activities and refreshments to support sustainability;

- Micro-funding can effectively reach people over 50 at risk of, or experiencing, social isolation and/or loneliness, through small-scale, localised activities; and
- There is potential to build micro-funding into commissioning processes, policy development and future service design. Micro-funding offers a new dynamic between commissioners, providers and local people, increasing local capacity to generate their own solutions tailored to diverse contexts, complementing larger scale investments in core programmes. Micro-funding offers a rich environment to ‘test and learn’; generating evidence about ‘what works’ for potential funders. The approach is well placed to support social prescribing.

In our role at Ecorys as the independent evaluator and learning partner for the Ageing Better programme, we are working with TNLCF and Ageing Better partnerships to generate programme insights and will share this through future learning papers and events to influence wider service design.

This report is accompanied by a Summary paper and Method note, available [online](#).



Micro-funded OLGBT 50 Year Anniversary Event, Oldham, Greater Manchester

Glossary

Age Friendly Business - Businesses that are accessible and navigable for older people. From: Age UK. 2017. Age-friendly business: valuing and including older consumers in supermarkets and service companies²⁶.

Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) - is an approach based on the principle of identifying and mobilising individual and community 'assets', rather than focusing on problems and needs (i.e. 'deficits')²⁷.

BME - Black and minority ethnic.

Community - This can refer to a geographical area or a community of interest. This group might be geographically related, such as a retirement community, or a community of interest dispersed across a wider area (in the context of Ageing Better this includes a range of marginalised groups: BME, LGBTQ+, carers, those living alone and men).

Community Connectors - Any mechanism that works to identify isolated people over 50 and then works with them to help them transition from isolated to less isolated through person-centred structured support. This includes community navigators, social prescribing and approaches that involve people overcoming a specific barrier, for example, mental health²⁸.

Decision maker micro-funding - a person from the community involved in a decision making panel, which commissions micro-funding activity by awarding funds to local groups and/or individuals.

LGBTQ+ - Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (or questioning)²⁹.

Local (context) - There is no agreed definition, although this refers to a geographic area. It can range from hyper-local (a group of houses, a street or village), to a neighbourhood or ward level, and local authority (LA) area. This would not extend to

²⁶ Available from: https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/active-communities/rb_feb17_age_friendly_business.pdf

²⁷ Frost, S, Learning Network Development Manager, Altogether Better Learning Network, September 2011 *Asset Based Community Development (ABCD)* Available from: <http://www.altogetherbetter.org.uk/Data/Sites/1/5-assetbasedcommunitydevelopment.pdf>

²⁸ Definition developed by Ageing Better partnerships with facilitation from Hall Aitken, the Support and Development contractor for the Ageing Better programme.

²⁹ Definition from the Cambridge dictionary
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/lgbtq>

a whole 'region'. (The English regions, formerly known as the government office regions, are the highest tier of sub-national division in the country. Between 1994 and 2011, nine regions had officially devolved functions within government. Although they no longer fulfil this role, they continue to be used for statistical and some administrative purposes)³⁰.

Micro-funded group lead - a person from the local community who leads a group awarded micro-funding. Group leads are also often participant volunteers.

Participant volunteers - people who support project design and delivery, but also take part in its activities.

Partnership - Partnership refers to the individuals and organisations (partners) that oversee and support the delivery of Ageing Better in each of the 14 programme areas. Each partnership selects a variety of projects that best meet local needs.

Project lead - paid staff from local organisations who co-ordinate larger micro-funded projects. Project activities are led by micro-funded group leads/volunteers/participant volunteers.

Social isolation or loneliness - There is no single agreed definition of social isolation or loneliness. In general, social isolation refers to the number and frequency of contacts with other people that a person has, and loneliness refers to the way that a person views this contact (for example whether it is a fulfilling connection). Social isolation is an objective state, whereas loneliness is subjective.

Systems change - seeks to address the root causes of social problem. Systems change refers to an intentional process which seeks to alter the components and structures that cause systems to behave in a particular way³¹. Operationally, systems change is associated with creating a new power dynamic between individuals and organisations, which aims to empower people to help create solutions to local problems.

Test and learn - Test and learn gives partnerships 'the flexibility to try out a range of approaches. It also means recognising and sharing when things haven't gone as intended, as well as when they have been successful, to create practical learning for others. Using this learning, the programme aims to improve how services and interventions to tackle loneliness are delivered, and ultimately contribute to an evidence base to influence future service development'³².

³⁰ Further information: <https://digimarconuk.co.uk/england-regions/>

³¹ *Systems change: what it is and how to do it*

<https://londonfunders.org.uk/systems-change-what-it-and-how-do-it>

³² 2018 Knowledge and Learning Programme Briefing, Ageing Better. Big Lottery Fund (May 2018, page 2)

Un(constituted) groups - Un-constituted groups are small scale and cannot purchase services directly. Groups require a constitution (a document agreed by group members) if they wish to hold a bank account. The constitution also specifies the group aims, management arrangements, decision making and disputes resolution procedures and ensures accountability. It also explains how committees and officers are appointed³³.

Volunteering - can be defined as any activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or someone (individuals or groups) other than, or in addition to, close relatives. Central to this definition is the fact that volunteering must be a choice freely made by each individual³⁴.

³³ Links. (Date unspecified). A guide to writing a constitution for an unincorporated organisation <https://www.linkscvs.org.uk/downloads/constitutionb.pdf>

³⁴ NCVO definition <https://www.ncvo.org.uk/policy-and-research/volunteering-policy>



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