



Sowing the seeds: Reflections on running a Small Funds programme

**A Time to Shine Report
November 2021**

Time to Shine Small Funds was a micro-funding programme. It enabled large or small third sector organisations in Leeds to apply for between £5,000 and £10,000 to pilot a new project or develop and expand existing work. 11 rounds of Small Funds were delivered between autumn 2015 and spring 2021. The Time to Shine programme provided the capital and Leeds Older People's Forum commissioned [Leeds Community Foundation](#) to manage Small Funds.

Leeds Community Foundation supports hundreds of charities and voluntary groups across the city and invests in these groups by distributing grants and sharing advice – acting as a catalyst for positive change.

Time to Shine is led by [Leeds Older People's Forum](#) and is funded by The National Lottery Community Fund's [Ageing Better](#) programme. Time to Shine takes a 'test and learn' approach to reduce social isolation and improve the lives of people aged 50 and over.



Leeds
Community
Foundation



“By developing a strong, close working relationship with Leeds Older People’s Forum and embracing the Time to Shine test and learn ethos, we have strengthened our understanding of isolation and loneliness, and our connections with community organisations working in this sphere. We’ve also experienced first-hand the value of working with and for older people and being part of an age-friendly city.”

Leeds Community Foundation

Introduction

The purpose of Small Funds was to distribute money regularly, within the third sector, for small-scale, short-term projects. It enabled delivery partners to try out innovative ideas or test new or different ways to reduce social isolation in their communities. The application process and monitoring requirements were lighter-touch and less onerous than for other Time to Shine projects.

Leeds Older People’s Forum brought to the table Time to Shine’s financial resources, test and learn framework, person-centred approach and focus on collaboration and partnerships. This married well with Leeds Community Foundation’s expertise, funding networks and passion for addressing inequalities through supporting the work of the third sector.

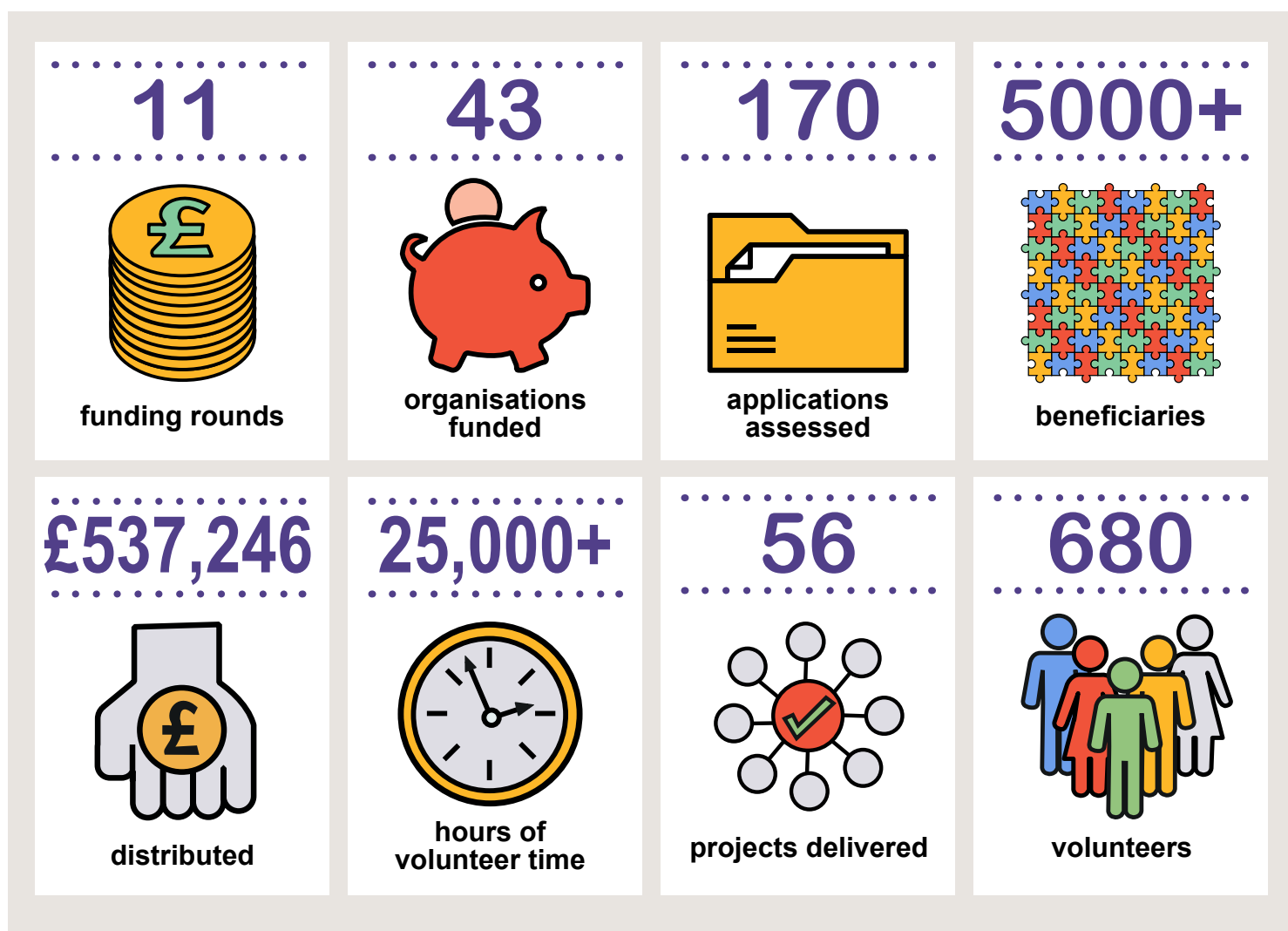
Leeds Older People’s Forum and Leeds Community Foundation chose not to create a traditional funder / fund manager dynamic at the outset. Both organisations now benefit from a strong, collaborative relationship which has developed over time. All organisations involved in Small Funds derived extra benefits from being part of the wider Time to Shine programme and this is explored in detail in a separate learning report. A link is included in the **resources** section of this report.

Purpose of this report

To inform this report, staff at Leeds Older People’s Forum and Leeds Community Foundation pooled their knowledge, insight and experience of working on the Time to Shine Small Funds programme. The purpose of the report is to reflect on key elements of delivering the Small Funds programme. An associated toolkit, included in the **resources** section, shares practical learning and recommendations. The aim is to help funders, commissioners, trustees and other strategic decision-makers to learn from the opportunities, and challenges, of the Small Funds approach. The report and toolkit may also be useful as ‘grey literature’ to help academics and practitioners to understand the context, methods and outcomes of this city-wide, micro-funding programme.



The picture below outlines the key statistics relating to the delivery of the Small Funds programme.



Reflecting on the test and learn approach

Test and learn required trust on all sides, collaboration and a commitment to sharing learning so that others could benefit. It placed emphasis on adaptation and flexible responses to changing needs, not rigid adherence to targets promised in initial funding bids. The Ageing Better programme from the National Lottery Community Fund committed to test and learn. Time to Shine was a conduit for this within the programme, demonstrating that strategic leadership is necessary to establish this approach.

Test and learn enabled the third sector to be creative and brave when applying for Small Funds funding. It enabled the decision-making panel at Leeds Community Foundation to take risks when awarding Small Funds, leading to a rich and varied tapestry of innovative and creative projects. It also enabled the funder and fund manager to reflect on and adapt strategic and operational elements of the Small Funds programme in real time and make changes where necessary. Many of the learning points are included in this report. Small Funds delivery partners submitted over 130 case studies, many of them test and learn case studies, as part of their monitoring returns. These test and learn case studies were analysed in Report 10, part of an academic evaluation of Time to Shine, and key themes were identified. A link is included in the **resources** section of this report.

“This has been a great experience for [our new charity]; managing such a large number of people and working cross-culturally with older people and supporting volunteers and the Syrian community.”

DAMASQ, Round 5

Reflecting on Small Funds as part of the wider funding landscape in Leeds

A good relationship with a wide range of funders and commissioners was essential to support a vibrant third sector in Leeds. The sector was, in turn, willing and able to respond to further funding opportunities. Small Funds was a significant annual investment in Leeds which focused on older people. It added value to other programmes that Leeds Community Foundation managed around older people. These included Leeds City Council’s Lunch Clubs, Winter Warmth/Stay Well This Winter and Ideas That Change Lives.

Leeds Community Foundation strives to be a relational grant-maker and Small Funds enabled the team to get to know organisations better and in some cases for the first time. 11 Small Funds recipients were able to build a track record with Leeds Community Foundation which has already supported new grant applications. 11 organisations received more than one Small Funds award over the 6-year period.



“Time to Shine Small Funds has enabled us to respond to requests of hard of hearing people, opening a new social/peer support group which runs weekly and has proven to be a great support for the hard of hearing community.”

BID Services, Round 9

Reflecting on key elements of the programme

When considering the programme overall the following themes emerged. All contributed in some way to the success of Small Funds and helped the programme, and the projects, to flourish.

Trust and an awareness of power dynamics

Leeds Older People’s Forum wasn’t a fund micromanager and the team trusted Leeds Community Foundation’s grant-making expertise and approach. This led to a very supportive and mutually beneficial partnership with a good power dynamic.

Co-production

Delivering Small Funds enabled Leeds Community Foundation to access the expertise of Time to Shine and Leeds Older People’s Forum around older people and isolation. This in turn helped to inform Leeds Community Foundation’s approach. The team actively engaged more with older people through commissioning panels, delivery partners and volunteering. Transferring power to a diverse panel of older people to decide which applications to fund for the benefit of other older people in the city kept the focus on co-production.

Collaboration, flexibility and support during the Covid-19 pandemic

Leeds Community Foundation and the team at Time to Shine worked well together to respond positively and flexibly when changes were requested by delivery partners. This support helped partners to address any challenges which arose, including those resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, and created opportunities for learning and reflection. Collaboration with The National Lottery Community Fund was particularly important during the pandemic as Small Funds projects had to re-frame at short notice and deviate from their original project plans. The National Lottery Community Fund’s flexibility, understanding and commitment to a test and learn ethos was key. This enabled Leeds Older People’s Forum to reassure Leeds Community Foundation and Small Funds delivery partners that it was OK to use Time to Shine funding flexibly to assist those most in need during the pandemic.





“We are making strong links with care homes and encouraging some of the local care homes to come along to our other activities at the Community Centre. We are communicating more with other organisations involved in Time to Shine such as Yorkshire Dance, LS14 Trust and New Wortley Community Centre.”

Fall Into Place Theatre, Round 10

Partnerships

In one round the panel felt that three applications, although good, didn't meet the Small Funds criteria closely enough. Leeds Community Foundation was able to secure funding for these projects through other funding which was available at the time. This unexpected outcome was due to good fortune, a strong network of funders and a focus on partnership working.

Integration into wider programmes

It was emphasised from the outset that Small Funds recipients were an important part of the wider Time to Shine programme and the Leeds Community Foundation grant portfolio. This created a sense of community and belonging and brought with it access to support, resources, networks, expertise and opportunities which were beyond the reach of small organisations. These wider benefits would not have been on offer in a stand-alone funding stream.

For example, delivery partners, beneficiaries and volunteers were invited to take part in focus groups and interviews led by Time to Shine's local evaluation partner at the University of Sheffield. This input contributed to two case studies focused on the Small Funds programme. Links are included in the **resources** section of this report. Partners were also invited to showcase their work at celebration events in the city and so reach a wider audience. Leeds Community Foundation was able to offer support with monitoring and help identify potential sources of new funding for Small Funds projects which were successful in the pilot phase.

Involving Small Funds delivery partners in wider Time to Shine activities (such as skill-share sessions, events, training and opportunities to network with peers) enhanced the Time to Shine programme as a whole. It helped other partners to see how diverse, short-term projects took small-scale yet creative and impactful approaches towards the common goal of reducing social isolation and loneliness.

Longer-term funding

Small Funds was one of the few longer-term programmes (5+ years) that Leeds Community Foundation had managed. A regular funding pot for Leeds Community Foundation, guaranteed for six years, provided added value and helped Small Funds to establish, grow organically and secure additional funding. Leeds Community Foundation's understanding of ageing, loneliness and social isolation developed over a longer time period; this experience influenced other workstreams and contributed to the legacy of Small Funds.

Reflecting on the legacy of Small Funds at Leeds Community Foundation

- Increased co-production with older people - through commissioning panels, delivery partners and volunteering - was pivotal in enabling Leeds Community Foundation to become one of 5 national partners in UnLtd and Esmée Fairbairn's 'Solutions for An Ageing Society' programme, bringing further investment into Leeds.
- Test and learn was adopted by Leeds Community Foundation and triggered a consultation exercise to gather feedback after Round 8 to understand people's experiences of applying for Small Funds.
- The case study template developed by Time to Shine shaped Leeds Community Foundation's approach to monitoring and evaluation. It was adapted and used in The Leeds Fund strategic grants programme 'Loneliness to Inclusion'.
- Group inductions enabled Small Funds recipients to meet each other, discuss practicalities and understand that their work was an important part of a wider programme. Leeds Community Foundation saw that group inductions were valuable and replicated them for other programmes, including The Leeds Fund strategic grants.



Conclusion

Small Funds was a successful element of the Time to Shine programme and in Leeds Community Foundation's grant portfolio. We encourage commissioners to consider running similar micro-funding programmes in the future, using the learning and ideas in the Small Funds Toolkit associated with this report. Many of the Small Funds projects, initially funded for one year by Time to Shine, continue to support older people longer term. To finance this work organisations may use core costs to fund part of the project after seeing the impact on beneficiaries. Successful elements, tried and tested, may have been incorporated into larger funding bids. Volunteers may have taken over the running of the project, significantly reducing the cost to the organisation.

The partnership between Leeds Older People's Forum and Leeds Community Foundation continues to develop; together we created Time to Shine's Seasonal Loneliness fund in 2019 and the Connecting Older LGBT+ People micro fund in 2021.

“The funding has enabled our organisation to really engage the Parkinson's community in the programme and really study the impact of the work we are delivering, focusing on the issues surrounding isolation in this community”

Ascendance Rep, Round 8

Resources and further reading

1. Small Funds: Setting up a micro-funding programme. (A Time to Shine toolkit written in partnership with Leeds Community Foundation, 2021)
2. [Greater than the sum of its parts: Creating a cohesive programme](#). (A Time to Shine learning report, 2021.)
3. [Reducing the loneliness of vulnerable groups: a case study of the Small Funds project](#) (Care Connect at the University of Sheffield, 2017)
4. [Case study of Small Funds](#). (Centre for Loneliness Studies at the University of Sheffield, 2020)
5. [Test and Learn: Understanding the experiences and challenges of frontline organisations](#) (Report 10, Time to Shine local evaluation, 2021)
6. Micro-funding: Empowering Communities to Create Grassroots Change. (Learning Paper No.5, [Summary Report](#), [Full report](#) and [Technical annex](#), Ecorys with The National Lottery Community Fund, 2020)

For more information about Time to Shine visit www.timetoshineleeds.org

For more information about Leeds Community Foundation please visit www.leedscf.org.uk