

Changing a place: Microfunding, co-production and community development

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Arbeitspapier / working paper

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Yarker, S., Thorley, J., & North, L. (2020). *Changing a place: Microfunding, co-production and community development*. Manchester: Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation (GMCVO). <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-66269-4>

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ambition
for
ageing



Changing a place: Microfunding, co-production and community development

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January 2020

A programme led by:
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Acknowledgements:

Thank you to staff at the Local Delivery Leads who gave up their time to speak to us about the process and organise focus groups. Thank you to the participants of the workshops for their valuable insights and for the Contracts Officers at GMCVO for their time.

Supporting Documentation:

This document is one of three produced by Ambition for Ageing on the topic of wraparound microfunding. A briefing summary and technical guidance for implementing your own wraparound funding model are available from our website www.ambitionforageing.org.uk/microfunding

About Ambition for Ageing

Ambition for Ageing is a Greater Manchester wide cross-sector partnership, led by the Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation (GMCVO) and funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, aimed at creating more age friendly places by connecting communities and people through the creation of relationships, development of existing assets and putting people aged over 50 at the heart of designing the places they live.

Ambition for Ageing is part of Ageing Better, a programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. Ageing Better 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. It is one of five major programmes set up by The National Lottery Community Fund to test and learn from new approaches to designing services which aim to make people's lives healthier and happier.

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Glossary

Ambition for Ageing (AfA)

A Greater Manchester programme that aims to make communities more age-friendly and improve older people's quality of life.

BAME

A term long used in the UK to refer to black, Asian and minority ethnic people.

Bridging social capital

Relationships and networks made between diverse groups of people.

Co-production

Involving people who use services in the design and delivery of services.

Local Delivery Leads (LDLs)

The organisations responsible for Ambition for Ageing in the local wards.

Microfunding

The provision of small funding to individuals or organisations. In practice, this is seen in many models, from microfinance bank loans to small grants, peer-to-peer loans to community investments.

Place-based

A person-centered, bottom-up approach used to meet the unique needs of people in one given location by working together to use the best available resources and collaborate to gain local knowledge and insight.

Social infrastructure

The range of activities, organisations and facilities supporting the formation, development and maintenance of social relationships in a community.

Social isolation

The absence of social contact with other people. This is distinct from loneliness which is associated with a subjective perception of feeling lonely.

Test and learn

A variety of bespoke projects and delivery models are trialed, and good practice is shared and replicated across the programme.

Executive Summary

Ambition for Ageing provide microfunding in the form of small investments to individuals or groups who successfully propose a project or idea that aims to improve the lives of older people in one of twenty-four areas across Greater Manchester.

Decisions on which proposals get funded are made by volunteers who sit on decision-making structures within each local area.

Overall, this microfunding approach has had an overwhelmingly positive response from those involved. Both staff and volunteers felt the approach has lent itself to different types of projects being funded compared to usual and had opened the participation of the programme to a diversity of people and groups. The openness of the funding criteria allows older people to identify where investments are needed and bring funding into those areas without the onerous procurement criteria of larger-scale funding, has been crucial here in allowing smaller and unconstituted groups to apply.

However, Ambition for Ageing took an approach to microfunding that is not just a cheap and easy way to let citizens just do things for themselves. This research has found that the significant amount of support from paid staff is required to provide guidance, mediation, and oversight. Staff are needed to develop channels of communication and partnerships across sectors to ensure the groups are as linked up and effective as possible. To ensure the inclusion of more marginalised people and groups, a community development approach alongside the microfunding is essential. A small pot of money can have a huge change within neighbourhoods, but only with the right support. Often, the support offered alongside the funding was valued just as much as the money was in this programme.

To deliver a microfunding programme, Ambition for Ageing found that the most value was generated in places where the right conditions of social networks and relationships pre-existed in a place. This research found that the presence of neighbourhood social infrastructure, the shared spaces in a place where people have the opportunity to meet, interact and participate, provided the best way to ensuring successful delivery of a microfunding programme and it allows these relationships to develop. Not only is social infrastructure important in providing venues for events and activities, it also supports recruitment of volunteers and community engagement.

The recruitment and retention of older volunteers is a challenge faced by many social programmes, and microfunding models are not immune to this. Barriers to participation exist around particular cultural and social images of volunteering but equally structural and emotional barriers presented challenges to participation. Where a microfunding approach did provide ways to overcome this however was in the flexibility of the approach to be able to offer multiple different ways of being involved in the programme that suited a range of capacities and interests.

Microfunding models provide routes into engaging with more marginalised and socially isolated groups of older people, although this requires time, support and additional resource. The offer of a variety of ways to engage with microfunding models means that many of the barriers to participation for those from marginalised groups or those who are more socially isolated can be overcome. Equally, staff were able to offer additional time, skills and support to more marginalised groups allowing them to be reached, engaged with and networked with other organisations.



Introduction

Microfunding is the provision of small funding to individuals or organisations. In practice, this is seen in many models, from microfinance bank loans to small grants, peer-to-peer loans to community investments.

It is the latter that is provided by the Ambition for Ageing programme along with a programme of community development with a co-production approach. Via the National Lottery Community Fund's Ageing Better programme, Ambition for Ageing offers investments of up to £2000 to individuals or groups who successfully propose a project or idea that aims to improve the lives of older people in their local area.



Figures correct as of 16th January 2020

This report offers insight into the range of microfunding models developed and utilised by the Ambition for Ageing Programme. It aims to provide an evaluation of the microfunding process; highlighting areas of success, noting challenges and sharing learning for those who may want to implement similar practice.

Putting older people at the heart of designing the places they live, Ambition for Ageing facilitates the development of existing assets within communities, allowing older people to direct investments. Using this asset-based approach, all projects funded through the programme are delivered through co-production meaning that it must involve older people in the design and/ or delivery, and older people must be involved in the deciding of which projects receive funding. The place-based approach of Ambition for Ageing uses the spatial level of the ward to allocate it's funding with three to four wards selected to receive funding in each of the eight local authority areas.

The types of projects funded are captured under a wide variety of themes, reflecting the diverse range of activities that have been developed through the programme. Year on year, the five most common project themes across the programme are as follows;

- **40%** social action
- **28%** physical space
- **19%** outdoor space and buildings
- **17%** skills and employment
- **16%** adaption to physical spaces



A focus on 'space' plays a key part in three out of five of these top themes. This highlights the importance of, and the need for, accessible community spaces and social infrastructure within neighbourhoods.

Ambition for Ageing follows a ‘test and learn’ approach, whereby a variety of bespoke projects and delivery models are trialled and good practice is shared and replicated across the programme. This means there is less insistence on projects ‘working’ or delivering on pre-agreed objectives than might usually be expected on such a programme. The programme aims to deliver learning and development, offer research and insight, and generate new approaches to enable people to age well in their communities.

This report uses data collected from staff and volunteers actively involved in delivering the programme. Those involved in this research include staff working within the Local Delivery Leads (LDLs) as well as contract officers based at the Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation (GMCVO) – the organisation leading Ambition for Ageing. For the purpose of this report the term ‘volunteers’ is used to refer to the older people who were actively involved in making the decisions about what Ambition for Ageing money should be used to fund in their areas. This usually involved them sitting on one of more of the various decision-making panels, committees, boards or steering groups in their area. However the report acknowledges the contested nature of the label ‘volunteer’ even within the programme itself and amongst its participants.

Data collection for this report involved focus groups with volunteers in six out of the eight LDL areas in February and March 2019. Data from a previously held focus group on a similar topic was used with consent of the participants involved from a seventh LDL.

Area	Average investment size	Total investment via microfunding
Bolton	£1,227	£254,940
Bury	£1,551	£333,418
Manchester	£1,648	£355,710
Oldham	£1,126	£208,397
Rochdale	£1,619	£259,318
Salford	£1,412	£230,936
Tameside	£1,053	£206,360
Wigan	£1,168	£254,940

Figures correct as of 16th January 2020

Section 1: Microfunding Structures & Processes

For Ambition for Ageing, the microfunding approach is a wraparound model including a number of basic principles that each Local Delivery Lead (LDL) follows, and can be seen in each of their models (see Appendix A):



Involvement of older people. All projects funded through the programme are delivered through **co-production**, meaning that it must involve older people in the design and/ or delivery, and older people must be involved in the deciding of which projects receive funding.



Intensive support from local delivery staff to provide guidance, mediation, and oversight to older people involved.



Community development and capacity building. Supported application processes and networking opportunities for investees meant the funding was available to smaller and unconstituted groups



A **test and learn approach.** LDLs were permitted to change and develop their structures and processes to tailor the microfunding approach to their local area.



An **open funding criteria.** Projects were funded based on the expressed wishes of older people who decided where investments should be made. Older volunteers conducted community investigations and asset mapping activities to identify gaps and priorities.

The Ambition for Ageing programme takes an approach to microfunding that is about more than simply providing small amounts of funding. Ambition for Ageing uses the awarding of small investments to build capacity in places with the most need. Through the provision of direct support Ambition for Ageing ensures that access to these resources is opened up to groups and individuals less commonly involved in such programmes. Some microfunding models are simply an application process without the wrap-around support that Ambition for Ageing wanted LDLs to build in to their models. For this programme it was important that a community development approach was delivered alongside the microfunding so that people from more marginalised groups had the support to apply for the funding. To look into this aspect of microfunding in more depth, the Ambition for Ageing Equalities Board, hosted by the LGBT Foundation, will be releasing a report later in 2019 on the value of small pots of money and community-led research.

Therefore microfunding in this context needs to be understood as an inclusive investment process rather than a stand-alone method of funding - part of a larger approach to devolving decision-making that encompasses a combination of co-production, a place-based focus and a commitment to learning. However, due to the flexibility of the programme there is variation in how this approach has been applied across Greater Manchester. This diversity of delivery is demonstrated by the LDL diagrams (see Appendix i) showing how the programme works in each area, from initial project idea, through to funding and delivery.

From the outset, Ambition for Ageing saw the funding as community investments. Local Delivery Leads had an open funding criteria to ensure projects funded were based on the wishes of older people. It was required that funding was given in response to community investigations wherein priorities, gaps and or challenges were identified in the local area. LDLs were permitted to rework and adapt their model as they saw fit, in line with the test and learn ethos of the programme. LDLs could not fund day-to-day running costs, building or refurbishment work (not including minor iterations, such as changing signage to making a

building more dementia-friendly), buying land or buildings, religious or political activities or travel outside the UK.

This section of the report compares and contrasts some of the different approaches taken to delivering Ambition for Ageing across Greater Manchester, highlighting what has worked, what has been challenging and some of the broader learning we can draw from the diversity of experience.

As illustrated by the Local Delivery Lead diagrams (see Appendix i), the co-production element of the programme has meant that the delivery of microfunding has evolved differently in each area. However in each area LDL staff began by recruiting volunteers to form the decision making structures. This recruitment happened in a variety of ways. Sometimes LDL staff approached people individually based on personal contacts or prior experience of working with them. In other instances launch events were held in the local area asking for volunteers to come forward. This was often supplemented with advertising in local newspapers, leaflets or through the local networks of the local delivery organisation. For most LDLs recruitment has continued throughout the programme and the arrangement and composition of the decision-making structures in their area has also continued to evolve.

Microfunding on Ambition for Ageing offers up to £2000 to individuals or groups who successfully propose a project or idea that aims to improve the lives of older people in that area.

1.1 What about the microfunding processes and procedures has been successful

The **level of financial resource** has been a key feature of these models. Being able to fund everything that meets the criteria, as opposed to having to make judgements on applications in relation to one another removes any competitive element from the process. This lessens the fear of rejection, gives scope to support people to apply, and promotes a more collaborative ethos. Removing the element of competition has opened space for more **networking and collaboration** between groups often facilitated by LDL led events and introductions. This has been crucial in fostering a spirit of community integration across the programme thereby supporting the development of bridging capital i.e. social networks and relationships between individuals or groups with different backgrounds and or experiences.

Offering **small amounts** of money and being open to non-constituted groups meant that in the opinion of some of the LDL staff, the programme had been opened to people who may not have considered applying for funding before thereby widening the participation of the programme. Smaller amounts were viewed as less daunting to those who perhaps didn't want to take on as much responsibility or did not have as much previous experience of taking on the partial delivery of local services. Allied to this the funding criteria was largely judged by the volunteers to be clear and easy to follow.

The flexibility of the microfunding approach meant that LDLs could develop **different levels and compositions of decision-making** to suit the needs of their area. Most areas had at least two tiers of decision-making structure, one which was usually based at ward level with a second tier that worked across the wards in some capacity. Decisions on funding projects were usually taken at ward level although this would sometimes only be to a certain financial amount or given the final say at a larger steering board. Ward level groups were referred to by various names including Local Steering groups, Investment Panel, Advisory Boards and Neighbourhood Boards. Such groups consisted mainly of older people as volunteers, but in some instances included 'professionals' such as local GPs, ward officers or Councillors.

Volunteer membership of the various democratic structures in each LDL appeared flexible and transparent, with volunteers moving between structures or being able to occupy more than one at a time. In addition to the decision-making structures each LDL had additional groups of volunteers that supported the outreach and capacity building of the programme. This can

be seen in the form of the People's Platform and community road shows in Bolton, Forums in Wigan, participatory budgeting events in Oldham and programme Ambassadors in Bolton (for fuller details on all LDLs see diagrams). Therefore it is important that the work of the decision making panels for investments is considered in the context of these supporting structures.

Listen to Yasmin from Age UK Bolton talk about the microfunding model in Bolton

We spoke to Yasmin Holgeth, Ambition for Ageing Project Officer at Bolton CVS about the microfunding model in Bolton.

Yasmin spoke about how they worked alongside local people to map what was needed in their local area. They then moved onto developing and delivering the application process, which takes the form of a resident panel as well as a number of participatory budgeting events.

Use your phone to scan the QR code to the right to listen to the discussion. Alternatively, visit <https://rb.gy/zwzcf5>



1.2 What about the microfunding processes and procedures has been challenging

Although volunteers were largely happy with the funding criteria and application process, there were some aspects that presented challenges due to some people viewing the criteria as constraints to the projects.

Firstly, there seemed to be divided opinion on the topic of funding day trips. Rochdale for example agreed with the criteria that Ambition for Ageing funding shouldn't be used to support day trips and argued that there would be no wider community benefit from it. Bolton, on the other hand, felt that the criteria gave restrictions and would have preferred to take investment applications on a case by case basis, seeing a great deal of community benefit and confidence building which can be achieved through day trips away, especially in more economically disadvantaged areas. Similarly volunteers in Tameside felt that the focus of the criteria on 'over 50s' meant that a lot of community development work was excluded from the programme. They argued that projects with a wider community focus would still benefit older people and that even those projects with a children or family focus should be eligible due to the increasing role of grandparents in family life. This shows how the rationale behind microfunding criteria can be interpreted differently in the context of co-production.

Over the years some alterations had been made to the **application forms** to make them easier to work with both for the applicants and the decision makers. Rochdale for example simplified the form and put it into '*plain English that everyone could understand*' whilst in Wigan a summary sheet of the larger application was produced by LDL staff for scrutiny at the decision-making panel. Many LDLs also had someone read out the main points of the application at decision-making meetings and some also invited the applicants to come and informally present their idea and discuss any questions. All these points have helped make the process more inclusive both for applicants and those on the decision-making panels.

The **ward level** geography of the funding criteria sometimes presented challenges to the decision-making processes of Ambition for Ageing. In some cases, such as Bury and Oldham, volunteers felt the ward boundaries did not correspond to how people living there either understood or used their local area in everyday life;

'I live in Moorside but I didn't know where Moorside was. I don't know where it starts and finishes, that's because we don't use ward names at all'
(Volunteer, Bury)

'It is a bit of an artificial divide between Crompton and Shaw, Crompton has less services so people would travel to Shaw instead'
(LDL staff, Oldham)

This meant that sometimes a project that would benefit older people living in an Ambition for Ageing ward was actually located or took place outside of these boundaries due to the location of a venue or LDLs using their discretion and being led by older people on how they viewed their own neighbourhood. It also caused some confusion over who was eligible to apply. The geography of the programme was one of the main aspects that didn't come from co-production with older people but was decided using population statistics by programme staff and therefore in some places had more of an impact on its delivery. Some LDL staff recommended working with larger areas, or working more closely within the local areas and existing services to work out how to carve up the geographical lines more practically. Frustrations regarding working with the designated ward boundaries point to a broader issue of citizens not always identifying or connecting with political geographies of representation. Ensuring the rationale behind the choice of geographies was fully communicated and understood at all levels of microfunding programmes could go some way to addressing this.

1.3 What we have learned about the microfunding processes and procedures

A **significant level of support is required** to deliver a microfunding programme in the approach that Ambition for Ageing took. Staff need to be highly skilled and able to take on multiple roles such as facilitators, communicators, mediators, and understand governance and equalities issues. These key members of staff are needed to hold the pieces together and provide consistency, advice, impartiality and facilitation to challenge the domination of cliques and power imbalances. All LDL staff worked very closely with volunteers to provide guidance and support but some were more directly involved in the process of funding decision-making than others. All provided support for applicants, but some (such as Wigan) were more directly involved in doing the research and putting together the application where as others (such as Bury) would direct potential applicants to discuss their ideas with ward steering groups first and then offered support if needed later. Some decision-making panels were chaired and minuted by volunteers (such as Manchester) where as others (Oldham and Tameside) were in the process of rolling back some of this administrative support from staff with the hope of making the groups more sustainable for the future.

The **importance of local context** and the **role that place plays** in how microfunding has evolved in different areas needs to be considered. Understanding of history of community organising, existing tensions and sense of identity within places is essential. All LDLs had a good understanding of these aspects of the places they were working in with many mentioning that their three to four wards had very different characteristics and needs. Some LDLs have found that their links to the local area has helped gain trust in a neighbourhood, others have used their 'outside-ness' to get access into different groups as a neutral third party. For example, in areas where there may have been tension between two community organisations, a member of LDL staff from outside the area and with no prior knowledge of this was able to play a third party negotiating role where those with more roots in the community may not have. In other instances, staff who had worked with particular volunteers or groups before were able to draw on these relationships and experiences to get people involved in the first place. From whichever perspective being aware of their position and using it in most advantageous way was key for LDL staff.

In most instances delivering the programme in areas where there was a longer **history of community organising** was easier than in those without. This was usually due to the local presence of a strong civil society with active community and voluntary groups and the infrastructure to support them. In some instances, the Ambition for Ageing decision-making groups developed directly from pre-existing groups, in others they provided important

connections into the community and its residents. It was also felt that this would help secure the longer term future of the group after Ambition for Ageing funding came to an end. However there were instances where a history of community organising and local activism actually hindered the initial progress of getting the programme off the ground. In some cases deep seated tensions between local groups or individuals had to be overcome in order to find a way of moving forward with Ambition for Ageing at a neighbourhood level. This was often facilitated by the relationship building and negotiation skills of the LDL staff.

In one neighbourhood, which had seen many years of regeneration programmes, older people were initially more cynical of the intentions of the LDL, having felt let down in the past when consultation hadn't been followed by what they felt were noticeable improvements in their area. It took the skills of LDL staff, alongside the commitment to giving older people control over the investment, to bring people on board and encourage a fresh perspective.

An awareness of the **socioeconomic context** of the wards was also important and had an impact on what approach was best taken to microfunding. For example in some of the more affluent wards, or wards that had access to other sources of funding (such as Big Local) the emphasis was more on facilitating things to bring the community together and doing community development work. In areas of high deprivation and a sense of decline, more capacity building work was needed to engage parts of the community that may have felt disenfranchised or to overcome feelings of distrust resulting from high levels of crime and anti-social behaviour. Funding decisions in these areas often tended to be more focused on value for money than in more affluent areas meaning LDL staff were required to encourage volunteers to think more holistically when assessing applications. In some areas the history of post-war housing re-developments had left a legacy of division between the existing community and 'overspill estates'. Not only did this affect how residents used the local areas (its shops, services and community infrastructure) but it also affected where community activities were hosted and who they were hosted by.

For example one volunteer spoke of the local housing association putting on a lot of events for residents who lived in that particular estate, but that this did not connect with the rest of the wider community. The extent to which local residents identified with place also had an impact on how they engaged with the programme. For example one LDL staff member in Oldham said that residents in Failsworth identified more with Manchester than they did Oldham, and therefore they tended to look more to Manchester for activities and participation opportunities. Similarly it was felt that some people living in Prestwich in Bury had a perception there was more going on for them in nearby Salford.

The presence of **social infrastructure** in a neighbourhood proved vital to the delivery of the microfunding approach. Social infrastructure makes a difference not just in terms of having physical spaces to host activities and to promote the programme, but also in creating the right conditions to run a co-production programme in the first place. Wards in which there was less social infrastructure, such as community spaces, public services and shops, meant there were less spaces for residents to meet and interact with each other. Shared spaces in a neighbourhood help develop a more active and engaged public life of a community where people have the opportunity and the inclination to become involved. This was one of the main reasons cited by LDLs as to why it often took more time to get the programme up and running than had been anticipated. Lack of shared community space meant it was difficult to know where to recruit people at the initial stages and in some cases it meant there was a lack of a 'sense of community' or a history of community organising in response to local issues.



Section 2: Volunteer Experience

An important element of Ambition for Ageing microfunding approach is that it is delivered in co-production with the individuals and communities it is intended to benefit. This means that older people from the designated areas are the ones making the decisions as to what projects receive the funding. The experience of the volunteers who participated in the research for this report were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences of microfunding however challenges were faced and therefore it is helpful to think of the experience of older people volunteering for such a programme as a journey of participation.

Older people took on a variety of roles within the LDL, many of which, were outside the more formalised microfunding processes. For example, in Bolton, the 'People's Platform' provides an opportunity for older people to have their voices heard without participating in a formal process.

2.1 What have volunteers appreciated about this microfunding approach?

Microfunding has been successful in **empowering** the older people involved to discuss issues that were important to them. Many of the volunteers especially welcomed the opportunity Ambition for Ageing provided to focus on issues of ageing. Some felt that they were invisible in their communities due to their age and felt they were not recognised for the role they could play;

'It's important that the projects gets over the message that we are useful'
(Volunteer, Tameside)

Being involved in Ambition for Ageing also gave them a chance to address lack of respect or understanding they felt from younger generations.

Many spoke of the **personal benefits** volunteering with Ambition for Ageing had brought to them. Some had become involved in the programme at a time of significant transition in their lives, such as suffering a bereavement or retiring from paid employment. For these individuals volunteering gave them a renewed sense of purpose and reason to leave the house at a time when they were struggling to find the motivation to do so;

'It has been the making of [name]. She was very very timid, very grief laden at that stage'
(Volunteer, Wigan)

'It's actually helped my mental health and wellbeing coming here'
(Volunteer, Bolton)

For others, being involved with Ambition for Ageing gave them an opportunity to build their **confidence and gain skills and training** in an arena they had not been in before;

'I'm not the most confident person in the world I will admit, but I'm getting better I hope and it's only by mixing and volunteering that you do'
(Volunteer, Wigan)

'By coming here you get involved in the CVS as well...and there is loads of training that you can go on...there is safeguarding, dementia training, nutrition etc.'
(Volunteer, Bolton)

Being involved in Ambition for Ageing also had an impact on the **social connections** of the volunteers. It gave them the opportunity to meet and get to know a diversity of people from their local area;

'I've made such lovely, lovely friends with this lady sat here and David over there as well and Mary, and if it wasn't for Ambition for Ageing I wouldn't have met you'
(Volunteer, Oldham)

For those who were carers or who live on their own, volunteering provided vital social contact:

'This has been a lifeline for me, I'm a carer at home and it does get difficult, so this is my free time and my own time to do what I want. It sounds selfish a bit but it's not'
(Volunteer and carer, Tameside)

As well as feeling more socially connected, many of the older people involved in Ambition for Ageing spoke of feeling more **connected to where they lived**. This was often about knowing more about what was going on in their ward or in the other Ambition for Ageing wards in their area;

'I was surprised how many organisations there already were. I live with a family and all but I hadn't a clue of half the stuff that was available in Shaw, you know, and that's opened my eyes to one or two things'
(Volunteer, Oldham)

Many felt they had become connected into a wider network of support and opportunities that they had not been fully aware of before. When asked what was the aim of Ambition for Ageing many said firstly that it was about bringing communities together, something that many felt had been achieved to some extent and was a source of anxiety in terms of how this work would be carried on after Ambition for Ageing. However a range of other benefits of the programme were identified by the volunteers involved;

'It's like for people that don't have anything to have something and bring people together, that's the main thing you find, the bringing together where there wouldn't have been a group' **(Volunteer, Wigan)**

'I think the main focus, well in my opinion is the actual social integration of everybody' **(Volunteer, Tameside)**

'I think getting people out of the house is the most important thing for people, getting people away and getting them engaged with others and talking'
(Volunteer, Salford)

Keeping process and procedures of microfunding **flexible and informal** has been key to retaining the ongoing commitment of volunteers;

'You've got to be careful to keep things informal, because people think 'oh I'm not getting involved with that. It'll be too regimented. I'm being told what to do'
(Volunteer, Tameside)

Although the level of informality might be relative, most volunteers on the decision-making panels found them to be informal and friendly and not too off-putting or overwhelming. The flexibility of being able to give feedback on application remotely and being able to change the level of type of involvement as it suited them was also appreciated by the volunteers.

Microfunded project case study: Let's Dance over 50s Ballet

Pam was “fed up of doing exercises that people thought she would want to do because she’s ‘of a certain age’”, and that she would love to do ballet as it is something that she and her friends had enjoyed doing when they were younger.

She was successful in applying for an investment of **£720** from Ambition for Ageing which helped to get the class up and running. Let's Dance now run creative ballet sessions for people over 50, with varying intensities to cater for all.

The project has improved member's sense of social connection and physical fitness. It has helped to challenge stereotypes about what older people are interested in, and show them doing activities that are positive for both physical and mental health.

The project is now self-sustaining due to a small financial contribution made by participants.

2.2 What have volunteers found challenging about this microfunding approach?

Now in its fourth year the majority of volunteers on the decision-making panels had been involved with Ambition for Ageing for some time, meaning discussing the challenges they had faced meant reflecting back on how things had changed over time. One thing perceived as a constant challenge however had been **volunteer recruitment**;

‘There will be an initial burst of interest and enthusiasm and then it’s the hard core regulars who are mainly involved in other things as well’
(Volunteer, Rochdale)

‘Volunteers are a very thin web that pulls society together. There are a lot of people in society that do nothing towards the community. Absolutely nothing. They expect the community to do everything for them’
(Volunteer, Tameside)

Challenges of volunteer recruitment are widespread and not uncommon throughout the community sector however the views expressed here reflect a broader set of frustrations held by some of the more actively involved volunteers. Some perceived a lack of willingness on the part of others to contribute to communities in the same ways that they did and misunderstood the multiple barriers to formal social participation facing some older people.

Although there have been various efforts to encourage engagement that have already been discussed, many of the more active volunteers on Ambition for Ageing still felt the majority of voluntary work fell to a relatively small cohort of people and that wider interest was lacking. This became more of a concern when discussing the sustainability of some of the work of the programme and who would be able to carry the work on.

When reflecting on their involvement in the early days of the programme some of the older people commented that it took some time for some of the structures and processes they had set up to ‘bed in’ and for volunteers to feel confident with them. This often involved making alterations such as the times and regularity of meetings, the format they should take and how they were run, as well as volunteers gaining confidence in their roles and with each other. Many of the volunteers spoke of the sense of responsibility they felt in making decisions on funding and took their role very seriously;

‘Once the network works you’ve got the responsibility to keep it going as we have. It’s that responsibility thinking that I must get out and do it because I’m responsible for other people being happy or whatever you know?’
(Volunteer, Salford)

Time and support from staff was needed to allow people to gain confidence in the role. Now in the fourth year of the programme many of the older people reflected that they felt much more confident in the decisions they made on funding and felt able to ask for more clarification or revisions to applications if they felt it was needed;

'I think it's grown over time because when we first did it, it was a bit like you felt you were writing cheques like a lottery winner, but then we've got a bit more critical of things and looking at what they want from a project. Because we've got to know one another, we can openly discuss projects'

(Volunteer, Bury)

The flexibility of the programme allowed for the tailoring of process to be done at the ward level but it did mean it took some time in some places to become more established. This reflects some of the challenges around a co-production and microfunding approach.

2.3 What we have learned about the volunteer experience of microfunding?

From speaking to volunteers one of the major learning points that emerged was the importance of a **feedback loop after investment**. Funded projects had to be followed up for the evaluation of the programme but there was no stipulation that anything from the evaluation should be fed back to the decision-making panels;

'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 if no one is in a position to actively monitor... so I think it's a weakness in Ambition for Ageing'

(Volunteer, Rochdale)

Many LDLs however did facilitate the collecting and disseminating of feedback with varying degrees of formality however what is important here is that the lack of any feedback loop to panels after they had approved funding meant that these volunteers often felt disconnected from the projects they had funded and, as a further result, were less able to say with confidence that the programme as a whole had had a positive impact on where they lived. This was identified by the volunteers in Rochdale and Oldham as something they would like to review for the future. Although volunteers were aware they could go and visit projects if they wished, this often didn't happen and as a result they felt they did not know how well or otherwise the projects were working. They also felt that if they had this feedback it would allow them to make more informed funding decisions in the first place.

Where feedback and follow up on projects did exist there was variation across the LDLs as to how this happened. Bolton took a fairly objective view of making sure projects had done what they had said they were going to do in their application. They asked for receipts and photographs to be provided as evidence of where the money had been spent. Wigan utilised the programme evaluation a lot more by emphasising the importance of the evaluation questionnaires with applicants from the outset and then staff carrying out the evaluation themselves and reporting back to the decision-making panels at their next meeting. Because of the composition of the panels in Wigan, this meant that volunteers heard about investments from other wards and it was notable that volunteers in Wigan were able to say with much more certainty what difference Ambition for Ageing had made in their area.

The second important message coming from volunteers on the programme is that being involved in the **process of microfunding** had just as much value as the funding itself. They valued the support and interaction they received from LDL staff and other volunteers and the flexibility the approach offered of being able to contribute to the programme in a way that best suited their needs and their circumstance.



Section 3: Reach and Engagement: involving marginalised groups and those at greater risk of social isolation

Research shows that belonging to a minority community of either identity or experience can leave older people more at risk of being socially isolated. This can include people from BAME groups, some religious identities, as well as those who identify as LGBTQ. It also speaks to groups with a shared experience such as those living with long term illness or disability as well as people with caring responsibilities, or the recently bereaved. Evidence presented in the recent Ambition for Ageing Interim Report (www.ambitionforageing.org.uk/interim2019) shows the programme has been successful in engaging with older people from more marginalised sections of the population and from minority communities. Therefore this section of the report is concerned with understanding how, and to what extent, the microfunding models of Ambition for Ageing have been able to reach and engage with more marginalised sections of the older population in Greater Manchester.

3.1 What has aided this microfunding approach in reaching and engaging with marginalised groups?

The microfunding approach has allowed Ambition for Ageing to engage with people who are at high risk of social isolation at all levels of the programme. Although volunteers on the decision making panels tended to be mostly those from less marginalised groups and had some prior committee type experience (i.e. typically white and with higher levels of education and professional backgrounds) this was not exclusively the case and there were also many examples of older people from more marginalised groups being actively involved in the programme.

To reach and engage with older people at higher risk of social isolation the programme has continually demonstrated the importance of **targeted work**, tailored and directed at groups of older people with particular identities and experiences. The approach of such targeted work will differ depending upon the groups trying to be reached. For example engaging with older people from minority ethnic backgrounds or particular religious groups has been successfully demonstrated by working with existing community groups or faith-based organisations whereas engaging with older LGBT people has been supported by having individuals who identify with this community on the decision-making panels. In such instances, although individuals were not there to act as representatives for their communities, they did act as a bridge into these groups. This was useful in the form of providing contacts but also by providing practical information such as what time to hold meeting to avoid prayer time, or how to make meetings more accessible for those with certain disabilities or mobility needs.

Many of the LDLs also ran targeted projects or pieces of research focusing on marginalised groups in order to gain a better understanding of their needs. This often formed part of their wider community development work. Tameside for example were running targeted research projects around people with dementia and BAME communities relevant to their area, and Bolton ran community roadshows to take the programme out into the community and demonstrate the work they were doing and the volunteering and funding opportunities available. This illustrates the important role of the staff involved in instigating, supporting and brokering relationships with a diversity of organisations and individuals.

Evidence from this programme and wider literature points to the different barriers to formal participation facing older people from marginalised groups. One of the successes of the microfunding approach has been its ability to **offer flexible and inclusive volunteering opportunities through a diversity of different ways to engage.**

This corresponded to the varying levels of capacity older people have to participate. Carers for example can often be concerned about taking on too much commitment in a volunteering role, and those with complex health needs might be anxious about their ability to sustain any regular voluntary involvement. However microfunding allowed LDLs to offer opportunities to engage at different levels of commitment. Bolton for example has a People's Platform that meets every quarter to provide the voice of older people to local services. Being part of this panel gives people a way to 'dip their toe into volunteering' as did opportunities to be involved with 'one off' campaigns or projects for those who only wished to commit to something with a definite end-point. Therefore opportunities were available that did not require a huge amount of ongoing commitment yet they did provide a pathway to further participation if this was wanted.

However it is not just the pathways created by the microfunding approach that support this but the relationship focused approach of the LDL staff. For those volunteers with perhaps lower levels of education or less experience of the more formal aspects of sitting on committees, the individual support and encouragement of LDL staff was invaluable in building their capacity to participate in the programme as demonstrated by this volunteer from Wigan;

'I'll be honest, when [staff name] picked me up and I said 'I'm petrified' she said 'no' and it was a room bigger than this, there was about 13 people around the table and I'm sat at that end I imagine me standing up and not knowing anybody. Then all of a sudden they awarded me £6000. I went out and I cried and I thought...(family members name) had not been dead 12 months when I went to it and this is what has brought me out of my shell because I'm meeting up with people and doing jobs and it's what they call therapy and I love doing it and you can't change me now. I'll help anybody'

Practical help such as arranging lifts, telephone call reminders as well as emotional support and encouragement from staff have been vital in facilitating the participation of those at risk of social isolation in this programme. This shows that with the correct tailored support from staff and volunteers and an approach focused on building relationships, that many of the emotional barriers to volunteering facing isolated older people can be overcome. This does however take time and resources.

The **place-based** approach of microfunding has also been found to be helpful in reaching marginalised groups by encouraging people to think about participation in civil society in a different way. Instead of a deficit approach of asking marginalised groups what could be done to make their lives better, the asset-based approach of Ambition for Ageing posed the questions of what assets were already in the neighbourhood and what could be done to improve the local area for older people. In short, it gave people the chance to have a say on what was happening where they lived and a sense of ownership over it. Anecdotally staff working particularly with groups of older people from BAME backgrounds felt that this had given their community a new way of looking at and thinking about where they lived. In addition the networking and co-ordination work LDL staff have done at ward and inter-ward levels in their areas has also been beneficial to bringing together existing groups from different backgrounds that may not have worked together before therefore creating additional opportunities to reach isolated members of the older population.

For example, in Oldham, following discussions at the first meeting of the Alexandra ward Steering Group it was agreed that it would be good to have a cross ward event for Christmas and that the Pakistani Community Centre would put in a project proposal for a cross community event. Alexandra ward has a number of very distinctive geographical areas and housing estates. The Pakistani Community Centre worked with Fatima Women's Association to develop the project It was generally agreed by all those attended that it had been a great success and we were reminded by one of the Pakistani Community Centre elders of the

importance of having such events – particularly since this is in the area that has recently been highlighted in the national media as a place of community tensions.

Microfunded project case study: Blue Bell Winter Warmer

Older men are considered a hard to reach group in terms of community involvement. Members of the Age-friendly Moston and New Moston Board suggested that the Joseph Holt Blue Bell pub in Moston is very popular with older men and went to speak with the landlord. Following this, the landlord and members of the Board developed a project plan which was successful in securing **£2,000** funding from Ambition for Ageing.

A fortnightly lunch club started in December 2016, with the funding covering the cost of food, advertising and an entertainer for each session, with the organisers collecting donations to fund the lunch club for the next year.

It was important that the lunch club took place in an informal setting where older men could present themselves by way of a personal choice, rather than being officially or forcibly 'recruited' was key to the men being committed to attending the activity.

Not only can the men enjoy meeting and making new friends in an informal, familiar setting, but the food provided is very nutritional and excellent value for money. Members of the lunch club said they actively looked forward to meeting up and that they felt they genuinely belonged to a community.

3.2 What have been the challenges of using microfunding to engage with marginalised groups?

Some staff and volunteers felt there was a particular **negative image of volunteering** the types of more formal structures used in microfunding as '*a very white middle class thing to do*' and a perception of volunteers as '*do-gooders*' that often put people off where they felt this type of activity was not for 'people like them'. Targeted outreach work and individual capacity building work as discussed above has been hugely important in overcoming some of these cultural and social barriers, and ultimately many of the volunteers on the panels who had at first been hesitant spoke of how welcoming and friendly the experience had actually been. Once again this demonstrates the importance of a relationship building and personal approach to get people over the threshold in a way in which they feel comfortable and supported

Aside from concerns over committee type volunteering 'not being for them' there have been **practical barriers** to participating for some older people. Traveling to meetings has been one either because of poor public transport or mobility issues. In these instances LDL staff have been known to arrange lifts and lift sharing for people and many decision making panels now allow feedback on applications to be given by email if people cannot attend. Barriers of language, literacy and sight have been overcome by producing paperwork in different formats and reading aloud key points. In addition there have been **cultural barriers** for some BAME groups who were not comfortable applying for funding from The National Lottery Community Fund because of its association with gambling. In such instances LDL staff have had to be more creative in their approach and worked with these communities on wider campaigns to improve the age-friendliness of their area instead of directly funding projects.

Within some of the minority ethnic communities there has been the particular challenge of overcoming culturally **different perceptions of ageing**. Within some South Asian communities for example, women in particular often associated ageing with withdrawing from public and community life as discussed by this Indian community worker;

'Some of the ladies in our community, soon as their husbands died they thought 'what is the point of living now? We're just waiting for God to take us', and then

when they come to our group I said ‘no, you have to live your life fully until your time comes.’

This demonstrates the significant amount of tailored development work required to reach some of the more marginalised groups of older people.

Social exclusion resulting from poverty and deprivation were a key concern for some of the LDLs in particular. Volunteers on the Bolton panels for example were concerned that the geography of Ambition for Ageing funding meant that wards that had the most need in their opinion were being left out and further excluded;

‘You’re using government statistics, but to me it’s the town I live in, and you know exactly what areas are deprived and which are not and you’re missing out...It must be so frustrating for groups and organisations there’
(Volunteer, Bolton)

There was a concern here that some of the most socially isolated older people in Bolton were not being reached by the programme because of the ward-based funding criteria. However the broader point here is that some volunteers did not have a clear understanding of why certain wards were selected over others.

3.3 What we have learned about using microfunding to reach and engage with marginalised groups?

Although Ambition for Ageing has done well with developing targeted projects and making mainstream projects more inclusive, less work has been done in getting better representation within the decision-making structures of the microfunding models. It was widely acknowledged that this would need **further time and resource** with some LDL staff mentioning the need for dedicated BAME workers or other staff whose role was solely focused on reaching marginalised groups. There is still a need for further research and guidance around the balance of having transparent and accountable processes, and having too many formalities that can put people off.

Provision of small amounts of funding for community activities has been hugely important and welcomed, however broader learning from across the programme points to the argument that for microfunding to reach and engage with those most marginalised, less money is needed on actual monetary investments, and more on **community development**. Volunteers in Rochdale for example felt that whilst intercultural connections had been developed at the level of the steering group membership and that a good network of organisations had developed, this needed more time to filter down into the rest of the community. This involves taking a **holistic approach** that encompasses both targeted work directed at those most at risk of social isolation whilst at the same time using the neighbourhood focus to improve the local area for all older people.

This is reflected in the investment allocations. During their first contract period, LDLs allocated an average of 52% of their overall budget to funding small projects. Following their contract review (by which point they had been delivering the programme for some time), the allocation reduced to an average 31%. Overall, the allocation of the overall budget to funding small projects was 40%.

An additional challenge to showing that you are reaching and engaging with marginalised and socially isolated groups is **access to reliable and accurate data**. Ambition for Ageing has continued to collect demographic information from those participants who have taken part in the evaluation throughout the programme. However as some participants and volunteers choose not to fully complete the forms data collected does not reflect the information we have anecdotally from staff and volunteers about the diversity of older people involved. Equally

some volunteers have been uncomfortable asking some groups, such as older Muslim women for example, about their sexual orientation whilst questions about levels of education can be off putting for those with lower levels of formal education, or who have been educated outside of the UK. Lack of engagement with the evaluation of the programme means that the true diversity of the programme participants is not represented. Therefore any tailored approach to engaging with more marginalised groups needs to also consider how we can better include them in programme evaluation that collects relevant demographic information in a sensitive and appropriate way.

Microfunded project case study: Colourful Creations

Residents at a care home in Oldham were looking for ways to tackle social isolation, as a number of tenants kept to themselves in their flats – not only at theirs but at other local care homes.

It became clear the residents were interested in creative classes, and with the help of a **£400** Ambition for Ageing investment, Colourful Creations was born. Weekly classes take place at Earls Lodge, with participants coming from nearby care homes and the wide community!

In May 2019, Colourful Creations received a second investment of **£400** upon application to cover the cost of new materials due to high demand! The project is now self-sustaining due to a small financial contribution made by participants.



Section 4: Sustainability of the work of the programme

This section considers the views of volunteers and staff on how sustainable they felt the work of Ambition for Ageing was for the future and what factors might influence this. As the programme enters its final funded year, the issue of how projects and the Ambition for Ageing structures would continue in the future was raised by both staff and volunteers. Individual projects funded by Ambition for Ageing were not intended to be sustainable after the initial investment although the impacts, networks and relationships of the projects were expected to continue.

However when the topic of sustainability was discussed by volunteers it was often through a concern around to what extent the work of the programme would be able to supersede its funding after 2020. The general feeling was that although staff and volunteers hoped certain aspects of the programme would be able to continue there was a level of uncertainty over how this would be supported and variation as to what aspects of the programme would continue, whether this was individual funded projects or the steering groups, committees and boards set up to deliver Ambition for Ageing.

4.1 What aspects of microfunding support sustainability of programme work?

Where there was confidence in either individual projects or the structures of Ambition for Ageing continuing it was clear that availability and access to further sources of funding was only part of the issue. Also of huge importance was being able to access **wider networks of support**. Where there was direct access to wider networks of support both staff and volunteers felt more confident that funded projects would be able to continue in some capacity. For example, in Tameside projects funded through Ambition for Ageing '*became part of the family*' of the VCSE support organisation, Action Together. Through this, groups were given support and information about become constituted (if appropriate), received funding bulletins and advice on completing funding applications to continue their work. A similar system was also in place in Bolton where the LDL worked closely with the local voluntary and community sector support organisations.

LDLs that did not have such a strong connection with such support organisations did not always have immediate access to this support. However they were still able to facilitate the networking of funded projects in order to provide them with additional sources of information and guidance as support from the LDL staff started to be withdrawn. For example Bury was in the process of setting up a Crafting Co-operative to network the various arts and crafts groups they had funded and Bolton were planning on running networking events in each of the wards to bring together the projects that had been funded to share their experiences and future plans with each other. At a broader level many of the LDLs referred to their local authority area working towards achieving 'Age-friendly' status and saw this as a vehicle through which to continue some of their work.

However **securing future funding** was, of course, a key concern affecting the potential sustainability of many of the Ambition for Ageing projects. The issue of becoming self-funding was raised across the board with some groups being successful in charging a small amount to its members or participants which allowed them to continue paying for things like room hire or to pay professionals to deliver activities etc. Projects that produced items to sell, such as community gardens, were also able to raise some income through selling their produce which allowed them to become more financially self-sufficient. Others seemed more focused on the securing of additional external funding that would replace Ambition for Ageing.

When it came to discussing the lasting impacts of some of Ambition for Ageing's work, it was clearly felt that some activities would have a more lasting impact than others. Examples where Ambition for Ageing had **funded campaigns** or had **supported existing social infrastructure**, communities were felt to be more sustainable in terms of their impacts. Examples of this include Ambition for Ageing investments into community spaces in areas such as Bury where they funded a new boiler for a community space that then went on to become the hub for a variety of different projects;

'All our community centres and libraries were closed just as Ambition for Ageing was taking off, so it was lifeline for groups like ours because we had a base. We'd been running a lunch club there (former community space) and lots of other things and then it closed and it suddenly fell on us as volunteers to find somewhere else'
(Applicant, Bury)

This demonstrates the importance of microfunding models being able to support local social infrastructure in order to ensure the sustainability of impacts and relationships developed during the programme. Not only did financially supporting existing infrastructure secure the existence of social spaces to meet and host community activities, it also created a network of goodwill where organisations that had received Ambition for Ageing support would help out with discounted meeting space, publicity for other events and activities and sometimes act as a signposting or referral point. Therefore the impact of providing funding to important social infrastructure in an area has much wider impacts than to just the space itself and contributed to the sustainability of such work. All the LDLs were putting into place plans to support the legacy of Ambition for Ageing work to some degree. Bolton's People's Platform – a group providing the voice of older people from across the local area (not just Ambition for Ageing wards) – looked to continue some of the age-friendly community campaigns and to continue to work with service providers. Tameside's local steering groups hope to continue to meet to hear invited speakers and host social events, Manchester is working on various legacy projects with its volunteers and Bury were making plans for their ward groups to apply for external funding to continue in some capacity.

Feelings on whether or not the microfunding structures of Ambition for Ageing would continue after the programme finished very much depended on how they had been set up and how they had operated. It was felt the outlook was much more positive for decision-making groups that had **evolved out of existing structures** such as Tenants and Residents groups for example. However in instances such as this there was not always a clear sense of how they would continue and in what capacity. Equally ward steering groups in Tameside built in other activities to their meetings in addition to the funding decisions, such as invited speakers. Therefore they felt these groups would be sustainable after Ambition for Ageing as they had another purpose to continue.

At times it was often difficult in discussions of sustainability to separate out the legacy of Ambition for Ageing from the continuation of structures and investments. As many volunteers valued the experience of being involved in the microfunding process as much as they did the impacts of the programme it is perhaps unsurprising that many wanted the groups and networks they had formed and become so invested in to continue even if this was not the original intention of the programme.

4.2 What are the challenges of ensuring the sustainability of micro funded programmes?

Securing future **funding** or becoming **self-funding**, was perceived to be a key challenge underpinning the potential sustainability of many of the Ambition for Ageing projects. There was a reluctance for many to begin charging for something that previously had been offered for free especially in areas experiencing economic deprivation and in some instances it appeared the idea of becoming self-funded was dismissed altogether. Sometimes this was

based on a belief that people would be unwilling or unable to pay for the activity either because people in the area did not have the financial means or the costs were too high to self-fund. This was often seen in examples where funding was used to pay for professionals to deliver activities. How to access and apply for other sources of funding was a particular barrier to smaller or less experienced groups. Such concerns were addressed by many LDLs by planning and hosting networking events for their funded projects, creating a space for potential collaboration and knowledge sharing.

A second significant challenge to the sustainability of Ambition for Ageing work was having the **volunteer capacity** to carry on and drive the various groups, activities and projects. There were concerns around 'volunteer burn-out' as well as a broader concern about how to recruit and retain a critical mass of volunteers. Many of the older people involved in the decision-making structures of Ambition for Ageing spoke about the difficulties of getting people involved. Sometimes this was put down to a general apathy towards social participation but there was also a recognition of many of the barriers facing people getting involved, especially later in life;

They are nervous of coming. What will it be like? Will I be judged? What are these people like? Are they all highly educated? They're not. I think that is a barrier that we've got to try and break down
(Volunteer, Oldham)

Again this underlines the importance of staff in supporting people to overcome these emotional barriers to volunteering in later life.

The question of sustainability was often bound up with how independent or self-sufficient both the projects and volunteer structures of Ambition for Ageing were. Across the board the volunteers involved in the decision-making structures of Ambition for Ageing had high praise for the LDL staff delivering the programme in their area often viewing them as central to the programme's success. However the other side of this was a tendency to **rely heavily on staff** for both practical and emotional support. LDL staff commented on this themselves as some had experienced difficulties in getting volunteers to take on the responsibilities of chairing meetings for taking minutes, for example. Some volunteers also required quite a lot of emotional support from staff in terms of building confidence and capacity to become more involved. In these instances there was a concern from both staff and volunteers about whether or not they would be able to continue their work without the often crucial support and input from LDL staff.

There were also **practical issues** challenging the sustainability of Ambition for Ageing work and these were usually the same factors that had presented challenges to getting the programme off the ground in the first place. Issues such as lack of public transport to allow people to easily travel to activities, as well as lack of appropriate and accessible venues and meeting places were both mentioned across the Ambition for Ageing areas.

Microfunded project case study: Friends of Moorgate Library

Following the closure of the library at Tonge Moor, elderly residents applied for Ambition for Ageing funding for a community library in a local school. They were granted **£984** to ensure the important resource was still available to the local community. People can borrow books, stay for refreshments, socialise and more recently receive a complimentary holistic therapy. The sessions are every two weeks, all afternoon and is open to the whole community.

The school library has provided a space where older people can come together, access a much needed service and develop friendships. It also provides opportunities for intergenerational encounters which can help to build understanding and dispel perceptions held by different age groups.

4.3 What we have learned about sustainability and microfunding?

The **conceptualisation of sustainability** in the context of microfunding requires further thought. Sustainability was discussed in different ways by volunteers across the programme pointing to a lack of clear understanding of what the term means in the context of microfunding and how it should be operationalised in funding criteria and project evaluations and what the initial aim was regarding the sustainability of the work of the programme. In some instances for example sustainability was equated with ideas of value for money, in other cases sustainability was linked to the success of a project and often it was very difficult to separate questions of programme legacy from programme sustainability.

Once again opinion on what could be viewed as a 'successful project' often varied as demonstrated by some level of disagreement across the LDLs on the issue of repeat funding. In Rochdale for example volunteers were broadly against repeatedly awarding funding to the same group or organisation for the same types of activities as they felt this demonstrated a lack of sustainability and the money could be better spent elsewhere. However decision-making panels in Wigan were more open to repeat funding as they felt this demonstrated the project was successful and therefore they were happy to continue to support it. Therefore the question of sustainability was tied up in a knotty question of what a 'successful' project was and how this should be measured.

Aside from conceptual questions of sustainability there were practical concerns identified by this research around how microfunding might be delivered in the future to make the work of such programmes more sustainable. In order for groups to become financially sustainable both **time and support** are needed to explore and implement alternative funding and support arrangements. This is something that needs to be thought of at the beginning of a project and not just towards the end. In order to start charging for activities that have previously been provided for free, time was needed for projects to become embedded and for participants to see their value and additional support was needed to help smaller groups seek out and apply for alternative funding.

Having a **feedback loop**, whereby volunteers making funding decisions were able to receive updates on the development and impacts of projects they had supported, could be an important way to improve the sustainability of micro funded projects as it could inform future decision-making;

'One of our points of criteria is the potential for sustainability but the difficulty of monitoring makes it difficult for us to know'
(Volunteer, Rochdale)

This shows that where there was a lack of feedback on the development of funded projects volunteers felt they were in a weaker position to make informed decisions about the sustainability of future applications. Therefore ensuring there is adequate feedback on funded projects can support the overall sustainability of micro funded projects if this is part of the project aim.

Finally, programmes such as Ambition for Ageing do not operate in a vacuum and their sustainability, or otherwise, are depended on both programme design and delivery as well as **wider structural factors** such as existence of social infrastructure, transport and economic deprivation.

Section 5: Staff Experiences

The microfunding approach represents a significant departure from the funding arrangements of many other social programmes and for many of the paid staff involved in the delivery of Ambition for Ageing it was their first experience of working in this way. LDL staff were responsible for the delivery of the programme in neighbourhoods and contracts officers, based within the central Ambition for Ageing Team at GMCVO, managed their performance and acted as their main point of contact and support.

5.1 What has worked

Generally, all staff interviewees spoke positively of the microfunding process, sharing a positive view of the 'test and learn' approach and the flexibility of the approach, which allowed for better relationships between the traditional 'funder' and those receiving the funding.

5.1.1 What has worked for LDL staff

Overall there was a general consensus amongst staff that the microfunding approach, with an insistence on co-production and 'test-and-learn' at its heart, had empowered older people to both identify and respond to needs in their community in positive, collaborative and innovative ways. This had brought benefits the individuals concerned in terms of building capacity and social networks, and a feeling of being invested in the communities in which they lived.

The **flexibility** of the programme and having '*few rules*' was central to its success in the eyes of the staff. It allowed LDL staff to adapt their ways of working that best meet the needs of their area and for the programme to '*naturally evolve into what we need*'. This has been vital in terms of structures and processes but also being able to adapt parts of the application form based on feedback from the older people they were working with. Many of the staff described this as a 'liberating' way of working. They also appreciated the openness of the funding criteria as a whole and felt it opened the programme up to a greater diversity of projects and ideas that more rigid funding criteria might have missed.

Central to the flexibility of the programme is the 'test and learn' approach and LDL staff felt this had encouraged a wider diversity of projects being funded as there was less emphasis on '*getting things right*' the first time around. It also allowed older people on the steering groups and decision-making panels to develop confidence in what they were doing as the programme developed. There was a sense that if they had been expected to only fund projects that were guaranteed to be successful from the start, and failure in being able to do this, would have negatively affected the momentum of the programme in that area.

The importance of having an open dialogue between the contract officers, LDL staff and decision-making panels was a key aspect of the staff experience of **co-production** on this programme. Staff agreed this was an aspect of the funding approach that had really worked in engaging older people and responding to their needs as they defined them. LDL staff tended to agree that, although it had its challenges, co-production was a 'refreshing' way of '*working with people instead of for them*'.

5.1.2 What has worked for Contracts Officers

From the perspective of the contract officers there was also a sense that the approach had improved **performance** from contractors and made the spending of funds on the programme more **efficient** as a result of the positive relationships developed that were essential in delivering the programme.

It was felt the test and learn approach also helped improve relationships with LDL staff as they were much more likely to approach them when things went wrong and to discuss the learning from this. This led to much more positive and open relationships based on dialogue.

5.2 What have been the challenges

As a test and learn project, ensuring flexibility and an ongoing dialogue about how things were going was important, as it was essential that contracts officers understood what wasn't working as well as the LDLs' successes and achievements. This was a new and different way of working for LDL staff and contracts officers.

5.2.1 What have been the challenges for LDL staff

Challenges faced by LDL staff represented the change in style of delivery, for example, staff were more used to delivering activities or services for people rather than with them which meant they no longer had traditional models of delivery which provided specific guidance and structures. Co-production involved staff having to be more adaptable to respond to evolving communities. This meant staff had to manage new situations within an unfamiliar landscape of the test and learn environment. Co-production involves investing more time and resources in listening to people and supporting them to develop the activities they want.

As this way of working was new to many of the staff this was something that had often not been anticipated at the beginning. The nature of the microfunding approach meant that often over 100 projects were being directly delivered by Ambition for Ageing in one area. For LDL staff this resulted in an increased amount of administration work such as chasing invoices, preparing and checking application forms, and following up on evaluation of projects. This differed between areas with some LDL staff being more directly engaged in the pre-application stage of the process and some providing more direct support after funding. In addition LDL staff would often take responsibility for facilitating or minute taking at multiple Ambition for Ageing steering groups, panels and forums. Again this varied across the programme with some LDLs having more success in encouraging volunteers to take on these responsibilities to different degrees.

All LDL staff commented on the amount of time needed to be dedicated towards **capacity building for individuals and for community engagement and outreach work**. Before microfunding activity could start there needed to be a significant amount of 'ground work' required in all areas to lay foundations, for example, recruiting volunteers to the decision-making groups and to encourage people to develop and submit applications. Targeted outreach work was necessary in some areas to engage older people from BAME communities due to a lower level of representation on some steering groups.

5.2.2 What have been the challenges for Contracts Officers

The contract officers had a similar experience in the need to adapt to a test and learn environment. The programme was designed to enable contractors to be flexible in their delivery and in order to avoid a rigid structure there were few targets or traditional performance indicators. This meant contract officers focused more on building and maintaining supportive relationships to ensure positive and open dialogue with contractors to understand what was evolving. As a new way of working, contract officers had to learn how to performance manage on a test and learn programme and how to keep up to speed with multiple contractors and communities. This was supported by effective database tools designed to capture contractor activity in one place. As there were so many projects to oversee there was a strong element of trusting contractors to test and learn and this also enabled good working relationships between contract officers and LDL staff.

5.2.3 Engagement with evaluation

The processes set up for **evaluating** the programme meant that LDL staff had to invest time in ensuring the evaluation forms were completed. There were sometimes challenges around communicating the need for the forms especially given the scale of projects involved and the disparate nature of the programme.

Some LDL areas took more of a pragmatic approach to this and created events or stages in the funding process where expectations regarding the evaluation were made explicit. For contract officer staff on the core GMCVO Ambition for Ageing Team, the evaluation forms provided a way of measuring the performance of LDLs.

5.3 What we have learned

Staff across the programme have all stressed the **additional time and specific skill sets** required in delivering this type of programme. The programme took time to 'get off the ground'. Sometimes this was due to the time it takes recruiting volunteers, sometimes it was around building the capacity of groups and organisations to make applications for funding, and sometimes it was about supporting local residents to develop and agree upon democratic structures and the way they wanted Ambition for Ageing to run in their area.

Allied to this is the level of interpersonal skills required on the part of the LDL staff in facilitating the smooth running of the programme, and the ability to build and maintain relationships with contractors on the part of the contract officers. Each stage of the delivery of Ambition for Ageing is based upon relationship building all of which takes time and the use of particular skill sets including negotiation, capacity building and developing trust. Staff referred to this as needing to adapt their usual ways of working in a way that saw '*the bigger picture*'. This alludes to a more holistic approach based on understanding relationships and context whilst remaining clear about the aims of the programme. For example contract officers spoke of taking a step back from the usual way they would approach managing a contractor and instead focused on showing encouragement and supporting the autonomy of the LDLs rather than just assessing them against KPIs.

'I think giving people autonomy and a real sense of agency over their work generally is a very positive thing'.

In recognition that the delivery and management of the programme centred on the building of relationships, staff had developed ways of working to support this, for example, contract officers organised quarterly networking sessions to regularly bring the LDL staff together, allowing them time to share ideas and support each other. This also functioned as a way of contract officers keeping up to date on what was happening across the programme. LDL staff also reflected on some of the more practical things they had learned through working on the project and things they would have done differently.

Whilst reflecting on the contracts, it was recognised that had more of the money been allocated to community development work this would have further supported the capacity building work needed to be done by the LDLs. One of the LDLs stated it would have been helpful to have had a dedicated worker for BAME communities in the area in recognition of the time it took to build relationships with certain groups. It was acknowledged that asset-based delivery models initially worked with the easiest to reach as a way in to working with more marginalised people in the community.

Some LDL staff found the monitoring of a test and learn programme lacked clarity but as the programme was designed to be flexible and non-descriptive, more structure to monitor performance may have hindered confidence and ability to adapt. At contract review, which occurred at the end of the initial contract and in preparation for the second phase of the programme, the LDLs were given a number of quality standards and asked to design their own specific goals and targets. Contract officers supported staff to produce a quality standards action plan which felt achievable for individual LDLs and which better corresponded to the needs of their areas and local older people. The action plan was monitored by contract officers, and sometimes where a goal changed the LDLs were encouraged to reflect on this as part of the test and learn ethos.

Conclusion

Microfunding is not just about the money. The level of financial resource has been an important part of Ambition for Ageing, however the opportunities for collaboration and access to networks of support are equally important. For volunteers involved in decision-making the process of participating in Ambition for Ageing have been just as important as the outcomes themselves.

Relationship building and dialogue are central to the effective delivery of microfunding. Meaningful relationships between staff and volunteers need to be developed to allow for true co-production to take place and for the target community to gain the confidence and capacity to be in a position to take advantage of the devolution of decision-making. Therefore this type of approach takes time and resources to develop.

Flexibility and informality in design and delivery are key. This allows the programme to evolve in a way that best meets the needs of the area but also provides inclusive ways of participating in the programme for those who may have faced barriers to civil participation elsewhere.

The microfunding approach, alongside co-production and place-based working, enables the programme to reach and engage with more marginalised communities and individuals at risk of social isolation. However this happens incrementally and through a number of different supporting structures and processes which need to be tailored to be context appropriate.

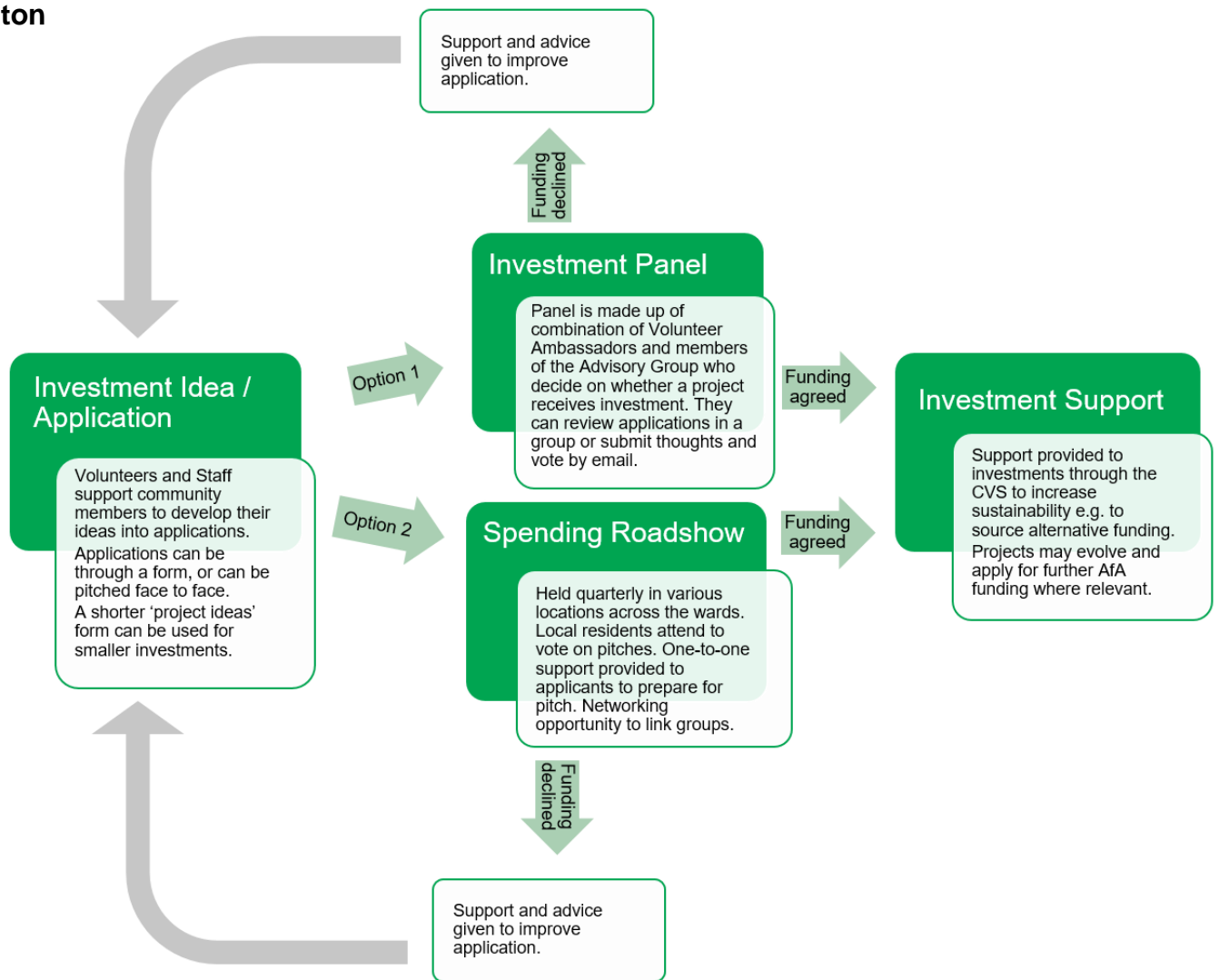
Micro-funding does not operate in a vacuum. There needs to be appreciation of historical and contemporary context and recognition of the broader structural forces at play.

Recommendations

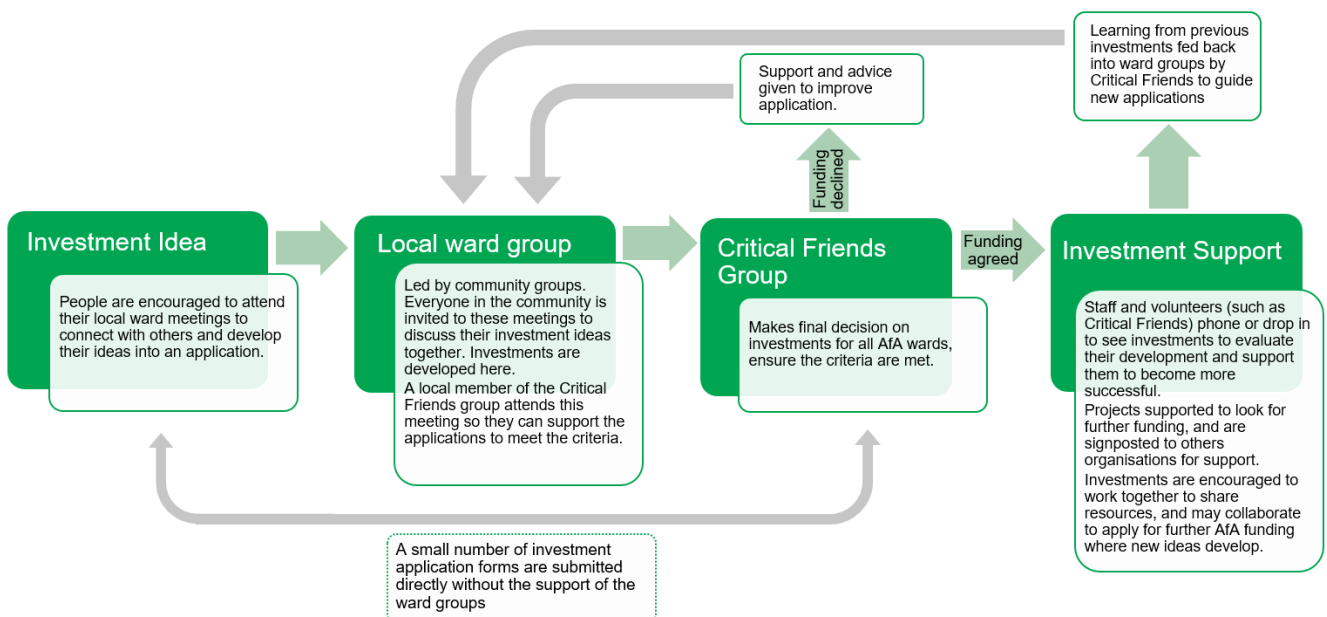
- Requirement for an effective feedback loop back to volunteers on decision-making panels should be written into the programme from the outset. The shape and form of this feedback should be kept open to the needs of the LDL but some mechanism by which the volunteers felt an ongoing connection to the funded projects has been shown to be important both in terms of making future funding decision and having an awareness of the impact of the programme.
- This microfunding approach is best when incorporated, or working very closely with, local community and voluntary sector support organisations. This ensures a wider of network of support that both volunteers and projects can be absorbed into and helps secure the future sustainability and ongoing reach and engagement of the work of the programme.
- Clearer framework for assessing sustainability is needed. This would avoid sustainability becoming a 'buzz word' and give it a clear operationalisation for the programme.
- An important legacy of the programme would be to ensure the knowledge and learning around how to deliver this kind of microfunding approach, and capturing and sharing this. This could take the form of best practice guides and a network of microfunding champions and consultants. This would help reduce some of the time needed to get microfunding programmes of the ground in the future.

Appendix i: Local Delivery Lead Models

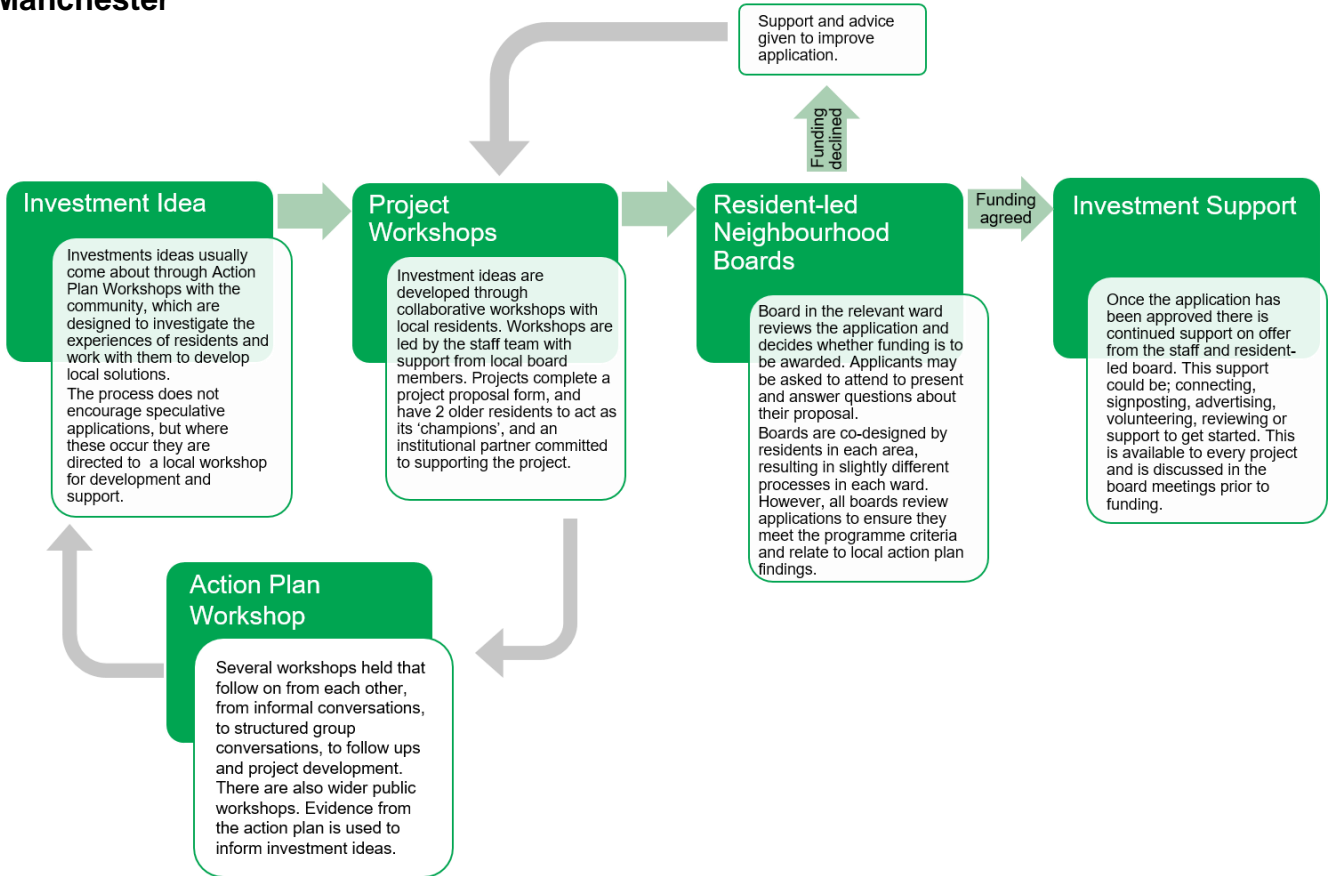
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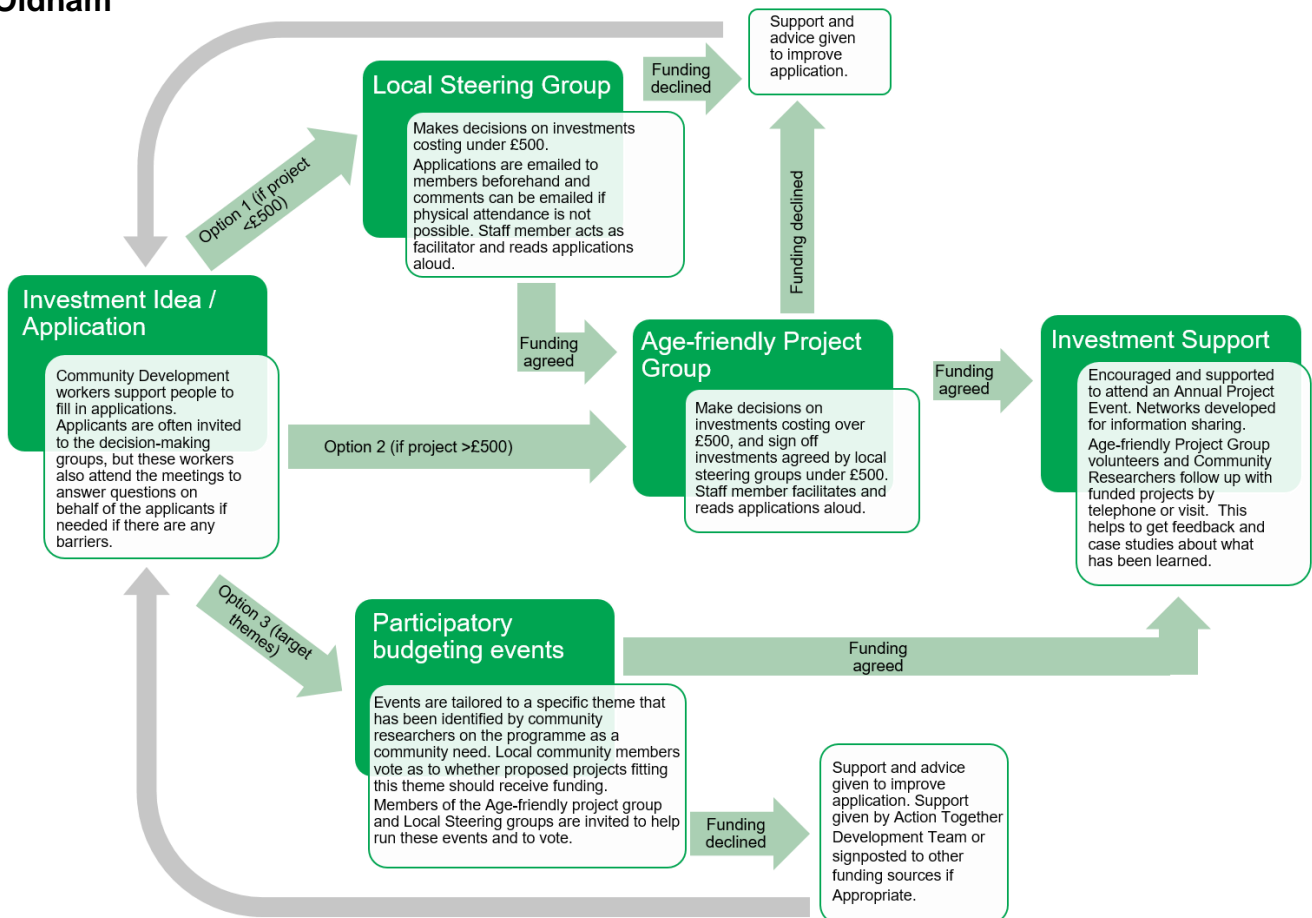
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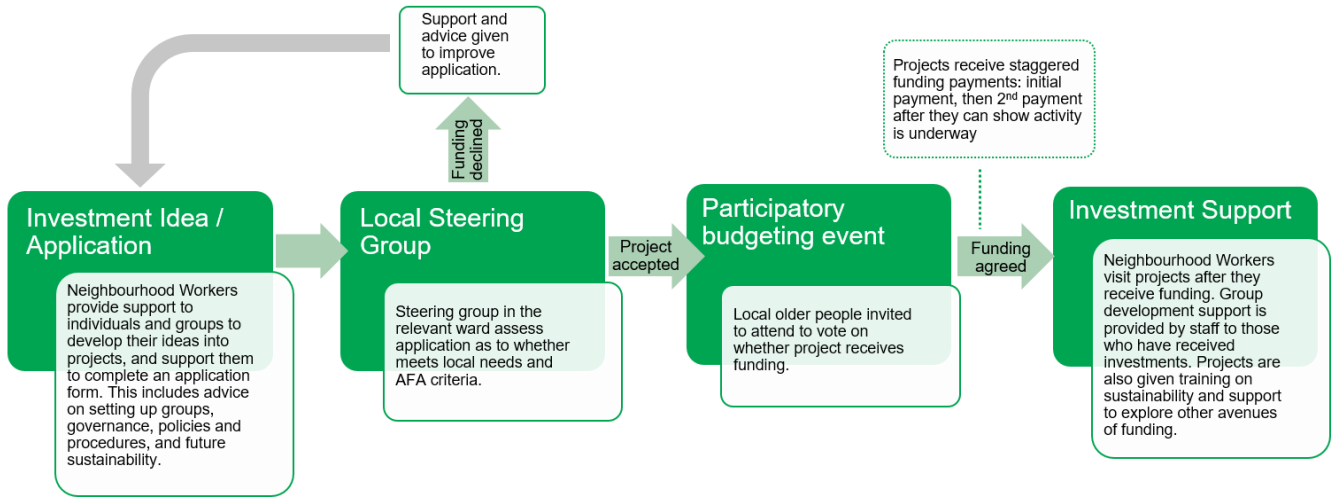
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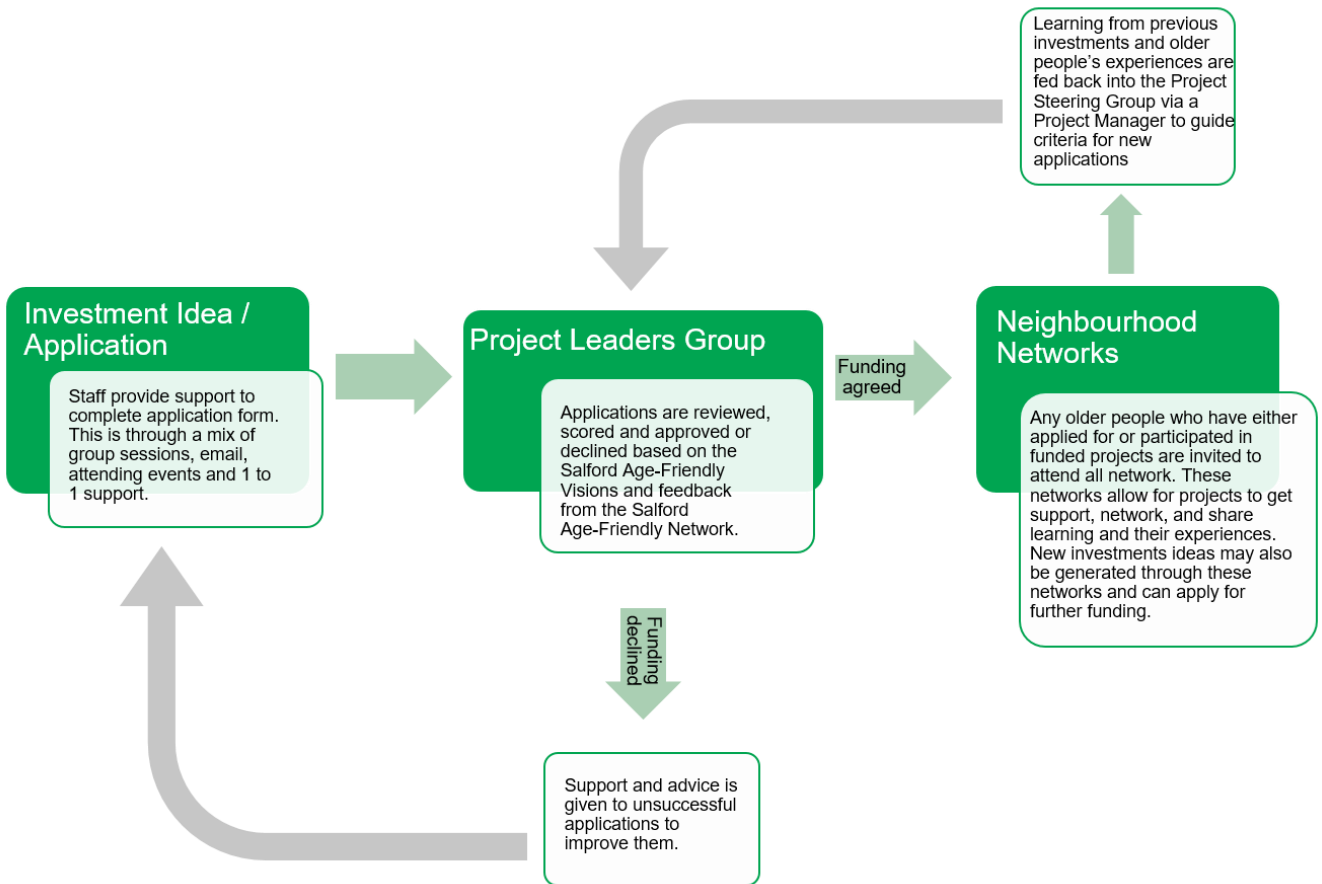
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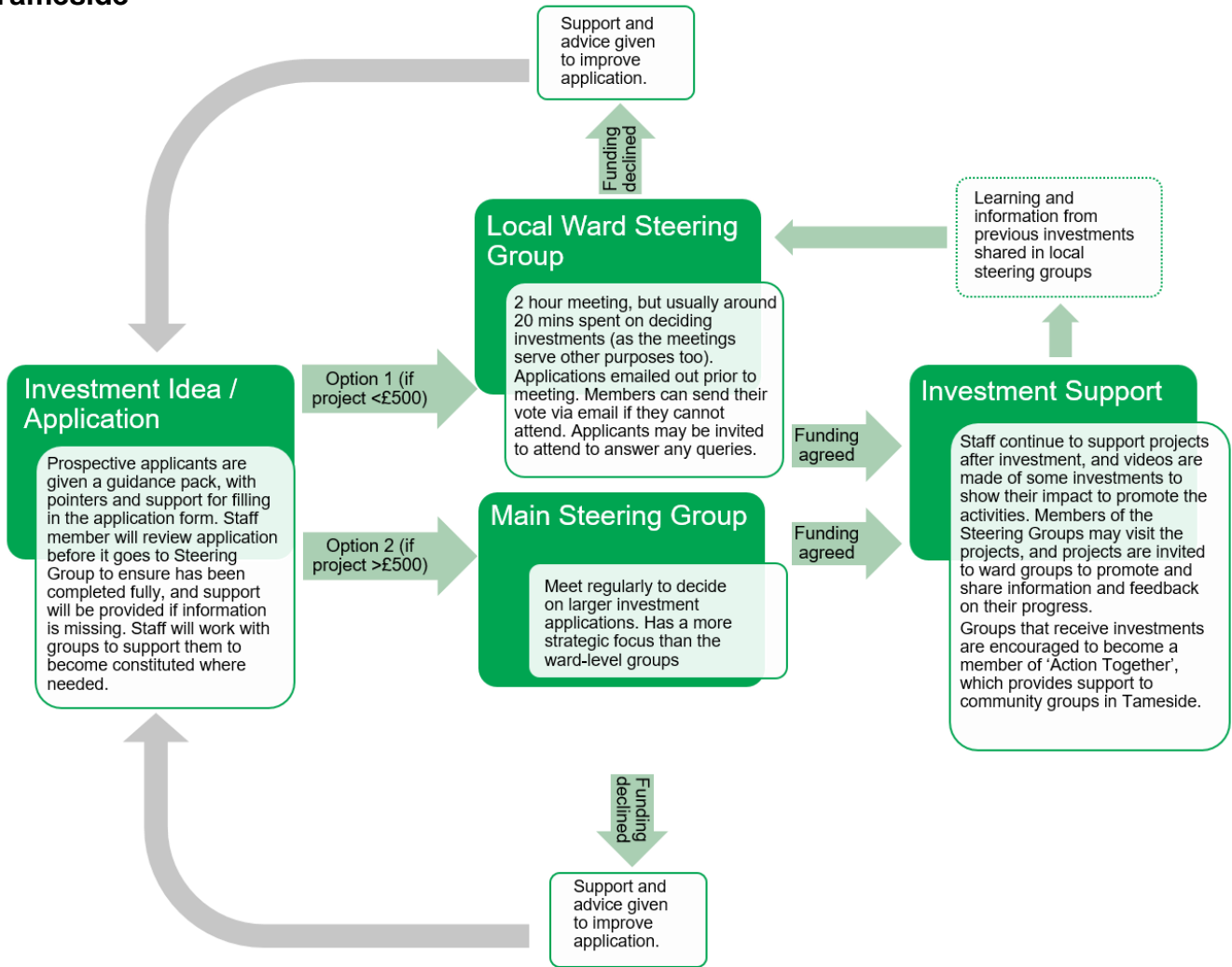
Rochdale



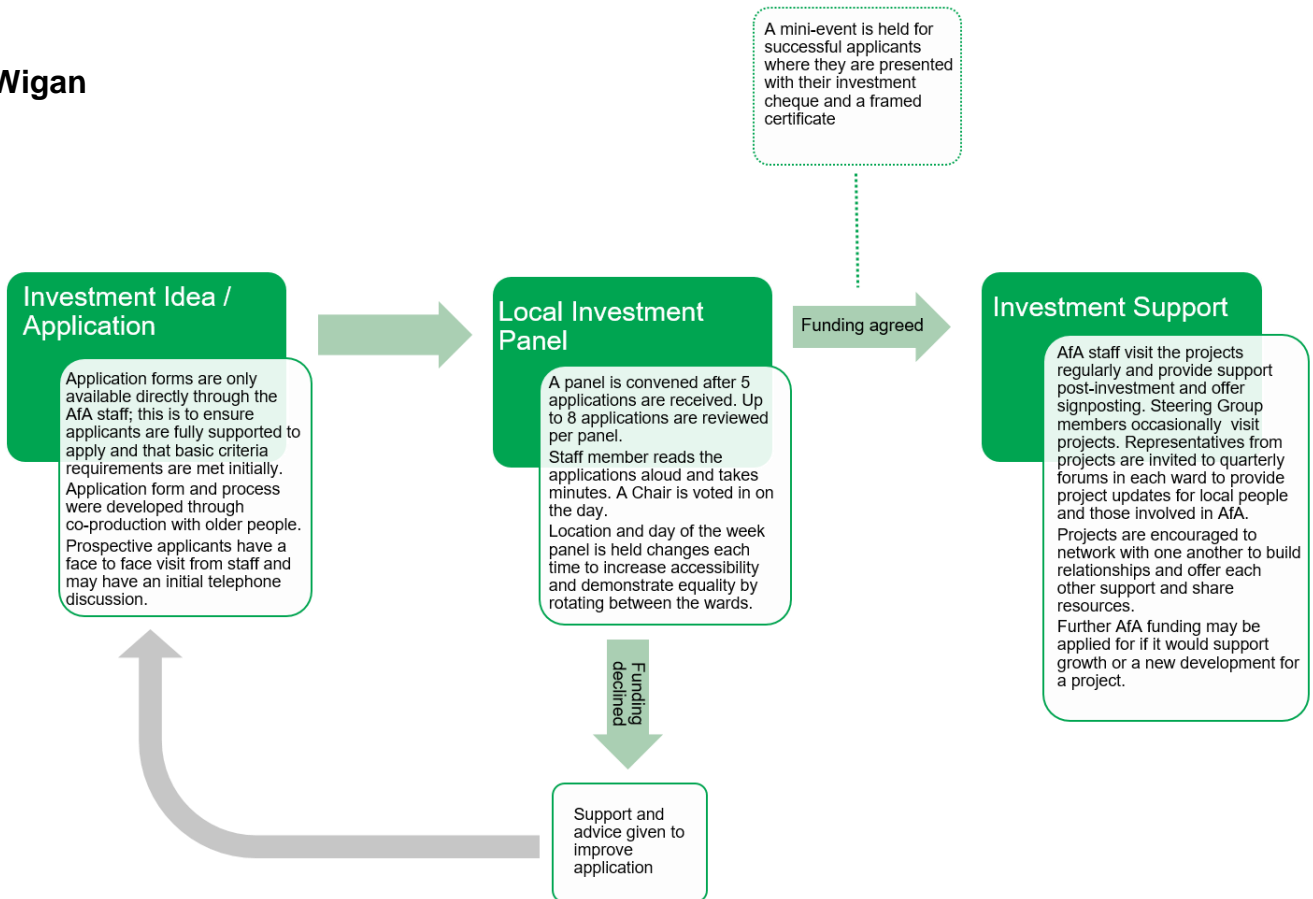
Salford



Tameside



Wigan



Supporting Documentation: *This document is one of three produced by Ambition for Ageing on the topic of wraparound microfunding. A briefing summary and technical guidance for implementing your own wraparound funding model are available from our website www.ambitionforageing.org.uk/microfunding*

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