Microgrants as a pathway for community development: A case study exploring impacts, implementation and context
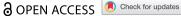
Claire Chivers, Christine Crabbe, Jan Fullforth, Jeremy Groome, Jenny Hoadley, Anne Jensen, Amy Beardmore & Mat Jones

Published online: 29 Jun 2022.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 749

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Microgrants as a pathway for community development: A case study exploring impacts, implementation and context

Claire Chivers ⓘ, Christine Crabbe, Jan Fullforth, Jeremy Groome, Jenny Hoadley, Anne Jensen, Amy Beardmore ⓘ, and Mat Jones ⓘ

School of Health and Social Well-being, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK

ABSTRACT

Microgrant schemes are used in many contexts relevant to community development, but there are few detailed accounts of their operation and effects. This study explored a four-year microgrant scheme in Bristol, UK. The research analyzed 141 awards and collected qualitative and quantitative data on 233 individuals. The research found that the diversity of activities, local embeddedness, skills and capacity development, social connection and volunteering features of the scheme offered routes to community development goals. Microgrant schemes are likely to benefit from designated staff to conduct outreach work, facilitate stakeholder engagement, and provide ongoing support. Coordination with other community development activities enhanced the scheme's impact while weaknesses in local infrastructure, caused by funding cuts, impeded delivery. Microgrant schemes should be understood as an intervention that complements and works alongside other community development activities. To enhance their role in community development, attention needs to be paid to scheme design, implementation and integration.

Introduction

In the context of community development, microgrants can be broadly defined as small funding awards to individuals and groups for initiatives intended to support community-oriented goals. Microgrants for community-based projects tie into a diverse range of policy agendas including the promotion of active citizenship, area regeneration, the promotion of health and wellbeing, locally-led solutions, community-capacity building, and asset-based ways of working. By helping to establish and sustain community activities, they can also be a tool to address loneliness and social isolation. Microgrants appear to be a widely utilized component in community development programmes, however their specific operation, conditions and effects are rarely reported in depth. In this article, we seek to understand how microgrant schemes create impacts, their processes of implementation and the significance of community and organizational context, through a case study of one UK-based initiative. In many communities there is a need for a greater number and more diverse range of activities available which are welcoming to people

aged 50 + . The initiative in this case study aimed to use microgrants as a way to establish new activities and grow existing ones, thereby aiming to reduce loneliness and isolation for residents of all ages including those aged 50 + .

In contrast to microfinance (small loans to households and small enterprises, often in the context of low-income country development programmes), microgrant schemes involve the award of funds that do not require repayment (Vines et al., 2011). There is a lack of consensus regarding the main elements of these schemes, and even whether they should be referred to as "microgrants," "microfunding," "mini-grants" or a range of other terms.

Nevertheless, there are some features that broadly characterize these schemes. A primary one is the direction of small amounts of funds toward community-based initiatives with social goals (Ecorys and The National Lottery Community Fund, 2020a; H. Johnson et al., 2006; Smeaton et al., 2009). There is often a focus on innovation and the development of new initiatives which can then become self-sustaining after the initial funding has ended (Ecorys and The National Lottery Community Fund, 2020b; Hartwig et al., 2006; Schmidt et al., 2009). Other characteristics include generating creativity and breadth of ideas (Caperchione et al., 2010; Hargraves, 2018; Hartwig et al., 2009; Thomson & Caulier-Grace, 2007), being able to take risks during project design (Hartwig et al., 2006, 2009; D. Johnson et al., 2007; Schmidt et al., 2009) and flexibility to make changes during project delivery (H. Johnson et al., 2006; D. Johnson et al., 2007; Smeaton et al., 2009). There also appears to be a tendency for microgrant schemes to more frequently cover costs related to "goods" for example, equipment, rather than "services" such as staffing costs or facilitation fees (Smeaton et al., 2009), understanding this as a way to extend the monetary value of a scheme through the use of volunteers and "in kind" donations (Bobbitt-Cooke, 2005; Center for Community Health and Development, n.d.; Hartwig et al., 2006).

The amount of funding available for each application varies widely between schemes, ranging from approximately US$28 to over US$42,703 (Ecorys and The National Lottery Community Fund, 2020b) with a range of levels in between (see for example, Van Rooyen et al., 2012 [US$50-1,000], Hargraves, 2018 [US$140-299], Schmidt et al., 2009 [US$4,069], Muenchberger et al., 2016 [US$7,487]; National Lottery Community Fund n.d. [US$13,775], Thomson & Caulier-Grace, 2007 [US$69-13,775] or D. Johnson et al., 2007 [US$40,000]). Given this variation, Ecorys and The National Lottery Community Fund (2020b) suggest "microfunding" should be "interpreted as a funding approach, rather than an amount of money" (p. 3).

The literature suggests microgrant schemes may have a range of *direct* impacts. These schemes may be well placed to reach marginalized communities (Smeaton et al., 2009; Tamminen et al., 2014; Thomson & Caulier-Grace, 2007) and address specific interests and locally defined needs (Bobbitt-Cooke, 2005; Ecorys and The National Lottery Community Fund, 2020a; Smeaton et al., 2009). Activities funded through microgrant schemes can help to build social connections (Ecorys and The National Lottery Community Fund, 2020b) and result in a positive return on investment through a range of social dividends (Bobbitt-Cooke, 2005; Local Government Association, 2016). Through associated publicity, the presence of a microgrant scheme itself can help to raise public awareness of an issue (Bobbitt-Cooke, 2005; Hartwig et al., 2009; Schmidt et al., 2009).

A number of *indirect* impacts have also been outlined in the literature, including building capacity within the voluntary and community sector through the experience of writing funding applications, project delivery and constructive feedback (Hartwig et al.,

2009; Rocket Science, 2013; Smeaton et al., 2009; Thomson & Caulier-Grace, 2007). This can then contribute to increased confidence and self-esteem for those involved (Deacon et al., 2009; H. Johnson et al., 2006; Thomson & Caulier-Grace, 2007), with a potential "ripple effect" whereby award holders help others to secure funding (Ecorys and The National Lottery Community Fund, 2020a, p. 6). Initiatives funded through microgrants may act as visible "quick wins," helping to create interest and motivation within a neighborhood thereby stimulating future community action (Deacon et al., 2009; Foster-Fishman et al., 2006; Schmidt et al., 2009). Microgrant schemes may also help to raise awareness of funding organizations (Caperchione et al., 2010; Center for Community Health and Development, n.d) and develop connections between organizations, with knock-on implications for future local initiatives (Caperchione et al., 2010; H. Johnson et al., 2006; Schmidt et al., 2009). These connections may be particularly beneficial for award holders in less wealthy communities where informal resources may be more difficult to access (Owens et al., 2018). Moreover, these schemes can help to maintain a diverse voluntary sector by ensuring smaller volunteer-led organizations can receive financial support (Ecorys and The National Lottery Community Fund, 2020a; Owens et al., 2018; Smeaton et al., 2009).

However, the literature also raises a number of caveats for microgrant schemes. The specific funding criteria for each scheme may limit some of the impacts noted above. Hartwig et al. (2006), for example, conclude that looser funding requirements can better help to meet local needs. Establishing a microgrant scheme too quickly can also detract from its impact through the rollout of ineffective programme management systems (Thomson & Caulier-Grace, 2007). Furthermore, the focus on innovation and new ideas may exclude groups wishing to be on "a travellator not an escalator" (Rocket Science, 2013, p. 27), or in other words wishing to maintain their existing project model rather than grow or change (Schmidt et al., 2009). This is particularly pertinent in contexts of public funding austerity where community groups may need to use microgrant schemes as a means of survival rather than growth (Mackintosh et al., 2020; Rocket Science, 2013; Thomson & Caulier-Grace, 2007).

The literature suggests that processes and support surrounding a microgrant scheme can enhance or detract from its impact; it is not sufficient to simply make funds available (Hargraves, 2018; Thomson & Caulier-Grace, 2007). Much of this relates to the application process, for example, the extent of proactive outreach (Smeaton et al., 2009; Thomson & Caulier-Grace, 2007), the transparency of funding criteria (Ecorys and The National Lottery Community Fund, 2020b) and the amount of support for applicants (Ecorys and The National Lottery Community Fund, 2020b; Hartwig et al., 2006; H. Johnson et al., 2006; Thomson & Caulier-Grace, 2007). Other literature points to a scheme's level of informality (Thomson & Caulier-Grace, 2007), accessibility of administrative processes (Caperchione et al., 2010; H. Johnson et al., 2006; Tamminen et al., 2014) and depth of reporting requirements (Bobbitt-Cooke, 2005; Hartwig et al., 2006; Smeaton et al., 2009; Thomson & Caulier-Grace, 2007).

Impact may be enhanced through opportunities for award holders to network between themselves (Caperchione et al., 2010; H. Johnson et al., 2006; Thomson & Caulier-Grace, 2007) and with other community organizations (Bobbitt-Cooke, 2005; Caperchione et al., 2010; H. Johnson et al., 2006; Tamminen et al., 2014). Schemes may also benefit from greater flexibility in relation to timeframes for project completion (Abildso et al., 2019). Moreover, it may be beneficial for the funder to be based locally or have a good

understanding of the local context (Ecorys and The National Lottery Community Fund, 2020b; H. Johnson et al., 2006; Thomson & Caulier-Grace, 2007). There is little evidence about the long-term impact of activities funded by microgrant schemes (Ecorys and The National Lottery Community Fund, 2020a) and, as Thomson and Caulier-Grace (2007) observe, the sustainability of an activity after the funding has finished may require one-to-one support and advice.

Microgrants within the Bristol Aging Better (BAB) programme

Operating in Bristol, UK, from 2015–2022 and funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, the Bristol Aging Better (BAB) programme aimed to identify ways to reduce loneliness and build social connection among people aged 50 + . A central belief behind the BAB programme was the value of having a broad range of activities and services available locally, and for older people to be able to contribute to and lead on these initiatives. The Community Kick-Start Fund (CKSF) was one of over 40 initiatives within the BAB programme.

The CKSF was a microgrant scheme in which applicants could apply for goods and/or services up to a value of £2,000 (approximately US$2,756) to support an activity aiming to reduce loneliness and build social connection among people aged 50+ in Bristol. These initiatives needed to either be a new activity for the applicant or allow new people to access an existing activity. Applicants needed to demonstrate that their proposed initiative was supported by people aged 50+, and that it could continue beyond a 12-month period without relying on applications for future funding.

Successful applications were selected by an Older Persons Commissioning Panel, consisting of volunteers aged 50+, who also advised on the application process and scoring criteria. A member of BAB staff made purchases and processed invoices on behalf of successful applicants; National Lottery Community Fund rules meant BAB could not award cash grants. The CKSF ran for four years (2016–2020) and distributed £229,332 (approximately US$316,003) across 141 successful applications.

The BAB programme and therefore the CKSF microgrant scheme operated within a context of significant demographic, social, economic, political and policy change (Mackintosh et al., 2020). Bristol's large and active voluntary sector was under financial pressure as a result of austerity, disproportionate funding cuts and increasing levels of inequality (ibid.). However, at the same time, there was also increased local and national focus on preventative approaches, asset-based ways of working, innovation and collaboration between organizations (ibid.; Rippon & Hopkins, 2015). This financial and social context heavily influenced the delivery of the BAB programme, including the CKSF.

Methods

This research study took place over four years (2016–2020) and formed part of a mixed-methods evaluation of the BAB programme, with ethical approval granted by the University of the West of England's Health and Applied Sciences Ethics Committee (reference HAS.16.11.045). It was a co-produced research project (Durose et al., 2012) conducted by five volunteer Community Researchers and two academic researchers. The Community Researchers were local residents aged 50+ who were trained and supported by the academic researchers.

The research used a combination of inductive and deductive reasoning; while the existing literature and objectives of the CKSF provided a starting point for exploration, the open in-depth nature of the approach allowed unexpected findings to emerge. The research was guided by the following questions: *"To what extent has the microgrant scheme made a difference to people locally?" "What other impacts has the microgrant scheme contributed to?"* and *"How has the microgrant scheme contributed to these impacts?"*

A total of 233 people participated in this research study, 211 of whom were participants or organizers of 38 activities funded by the microgrant scheme. The remaining 22 were programme delivery staff, members of the funding panel or workers in other local organizations. Seven activity organizers chose to participate in more than one research tool within this study. Alongside monitoring data on all awards, Table 1 summarizes the research tools and participant engagement.

Successful applicants were requested to arrange for those participating in their activity to complete paper quantitative questionnaires capturing demographic information and outcomes data. 181 individuals chose to do so, resulting in a self-selected convenience sample. Questionnaire data was inputted by a BAB administrator before the research team conducted analysis in SPSS. Outcomes questions were consistent with those used in the evaluation of other initiatives in the BAB programme and covered topics including loneliness, wellbeing, involvement in activities and unpaid help and volunteering.

The qualitative interviews used purposive sampling, with the Community Researchers making an initial selection of award holders to interview, which was then modified by BAB staff in order to broaden the diversity of recipients and ensure individuals were not being "over-interviewed" within the wider BAB programme evaluation. Interviews were informal but guided by a pre-prepared schedule to ensure each flowed effectively and captured sufficient data. The interview schedule was piloted beforehand for consistency across the sample. Broad topics explored within the interviews included activity implementation, perceived direct/indirect impacts and sustainability of the activity. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The researchers read the interview transcripts multiple times, coded provisional themes, and then began a process of collectively discussing the themes, revisiting the data, re-coding and returning to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

The case studies, observations and e-mail survey were all designed to check and further explore the initial findings. Activities were selected for inclusion in the case studies based on relevance to themes identified by the questionnaire and interview analysis, as well as

Table 1. Research tools.

Research tool	Participants
Demographic questionnaires	181 participants from 16 microgrant-funded activities
Outcomes questionnaires	129 participants from 16 microgrant-funded activities
Semi-structured interviews	30 organizers of microgrant-funded activities
	4 members of the funding panel
	3 BAB programme delivery staff
	2 workers from local funding-related organizations
	10 community development workers
Case studies	6 microgrant-funded activities
Observations	7 members of the Older Persons Commissioning Panel
E-Mail survey	22 organizers of microgrant-funded activities

participant availability. Observations were undertaken of the Older Persons Commissioning Panel meetings in order to understand and further explore processes related to the scheme's administration and decision-making. The e-mail survey contained both quantitative and qualitative questions and was sent to all activity organizers still within their 12-month funded period as of April 2019 (n = 95), of which 23% chose to respond.

While it was not necessary to anonymize Bristol as the location of the research, individual organizations, activities and participants have not been named.

Results

Reach and quantitative outcomes

Over the duration of the scheme, a total of 221 applications were received, of which 141 (64%) were successful. 23% applied solely for goods, 25% applied solely for services, while the majority (52%) sought a blend of the two. Although able to apply for up to £2,000 (approximately US$2,756), applicants did not tend to request the maximum amount; applications ranged from £112 to £2,000 (approximately US$154-2,756), with a mean of £1,637 (approximately US$2,255). Of all activities, 57% continued to run after the end of their 12-month funded period.

Applications covered a diverse range of initiatives and reflected a wide variety of individual interests, shaped by gaps in local provision. Many of these initiatives challenged stereotypes of aging and the types of activities older people may be interested in. As one group leader noted:

> When somebody finds a flyer that says 'dance with Parkinson's' people would often think 'I can't dance, I can't do that, particularly with a condition like Parkinson's'. So that's why we went out and did some demonstrations (organizer, dance group for people living with Parkinson's).

Table 2 outlines the diversity of the 141 initiatives funded by the scheme (with some initiatives spanning multiple categories).

Successful award holders were geographically dispersed with at least one award holder in each of the 34 neighborhoods of the city, although some neighborhoods had significantly more applicants than others. Outreach workshops were held in underrepresented areas during the final round of applications to encourage this geographical spread.

The scheme aimed to reach individuals and small groups without any prior experience of applying for funding. Over the four years of the scheme, 18% of successful applications came from individuals or groups of people unconnected to any organization, 15% came from small groups supported by local community development workers, 13% came from small community organizations and the remaining 53% were established organizations such as registered charities or community interest companies.

During the four year period, the activities funded by this scheme reported a total of 6,337 attendees, with most activities achieving high and consistent attendances throughout their funded period. Demographic questionnaires (n = 181) found diversity among attendees in terms of age (a range of 43–97 years old), disability (48% reported having a disability or long-term health condition) and levels of deprivation (44% lived in areas of higher multiple deprivation (deciles 1–3 of the Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2019)),

Table 2. Initiatives funded by the scheme.

Category	Number of Awards Funded
Exercise and fitness, including strength training, tai chi, kurling, pilates, walking, rowing, netball, pickleball, cycling and dance	26
Arts and crafts	18
Social clubs undertaking varied activities	15
Reminiscence and/or memory cafes	10
Shared meals, lunch clubs and/or coffee groups	8
Sewing, knitting and/or crochet	7
Singing and choirs	7
Drama and/or theatre	7
Intergenerational activities	7
Equipment for community centers and/or communal spaces	5
Woodwork and/or "Men in Sheds"	5
Information, including toilet maps, community noticeboards, website development, volunteering information and training	5
Transportation	5
Music groups and/or music therapy	5
Film, community cinema, photography and animation	5
Cookery and/or food-based activities	4
Writing and/or poetry	4
Games clubs	3
Audio recording and/or radio shows	3
IT equipment and/or support	3
Animal assisted therapy	2
English classes	2
Gardening	2
Mindfulness and mental wellbeing	2
Community-wide festival	1
Fishing	1
Local history	1

although a lack of diversity regarding characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, religion and sexuality. Questionnaire analysis also found high levels of loneliness (26% "intensely lonely" and 24% "moderately lonely" using the De Jong Gierveld Scale (n = 92)), low levels of involvement in clubs, organizations and societies (n = 123), and low levels of unpaid help and volunteering (n = 56).

Scheme implementation

Type of microgrant

Award holders reported that it was valuable to have the option of applying for goods, services or a combination of the two. As one participant noted: *"It was particularly important to our group that we could use grant money to pay our instructors . . . couldn't have functioned well without them. Also very glad we could use the grant to pay for transport"* (anonymous e-mail survey respondent).

The CKSF required the funding to be spent within 12 months, however several participants reported that this was not long enough. In some cases, set-up times were longer than anticipated, particularly where preparation work relied on volunteers or involved partnerships with other organizations: *" . . . the time it takes for things to become truly community and voluntary-led especially when we are working with very isolated and vulnerable people"* (organizer, games café).

Designated role providing support and coordination

The scheme involved a designated role within the BAB staff team to provide ongoing support and coordination. This role appeared to be pivotal to the success of the scheme and encompassed support throughout the application stage, support for unsuccessful applicants and support for award holders. During the application stage, the Project Officer was accessible through a range of communication channels, encouraged potential applicants to ask queries, provided guidance on organization-specific issues and, toward the end of the scheme, held face-to-face pre-application workshops. While these workshops did not appear to improve the quality of applications, they encouraged those from new areas to apply.

Applicants reported that it was valuable to receive detailed feedback on their application, particularly if they had little prior experience of applying for funding: *"It is always good to have feedback as inexperienced applicants . . . for a micro-group trying to help in a community it is all a steep learning curve"* (anonymous e-mail survey respondent).

Unsuccessful applicants were encouraged to reapply, which appeared to boost their confidence to do so: *"Being given the opportunity to try again and not be discounted was very good"* (organizer, intergenerational art group within Extra Care housing).

The Project Officer listened to feedback and, along with the Older Persons Commissioning Panel, identified trends in lower-scoring questions, made improvements to the application process and ensured transparency regarding funding decisions. In addition to pre-application support, the Project Officer also provided award holders with ongoing support, coordination and monitoring throughout their 12-month funded period: *"It took us a long, long time to start and BAB staff [were] supportive about it and very flexible"* (organizer, pottery workshops).

Support included making connections between award holders, signposting them to existing activities and services, providing sustainability advice, collating monitoring information, encouraging the collection of case studies and helping to problem-solve unexpected challenges. However, in addition to this designated Project Officer role, many applicants reported needing additional support from external sources such as community development workers. These workers spread awareness of the scheme, built up people's confidence to apply, assisted with applications and advised on sustainability. As noted by a member of staff at a local funding-related organization: *"In many cases actually what is needed is somebody to sit with them, work with them through a process . . . and just make them feel confident that they can do something."*

Proactive outreach

The Project Officer mapped the diversity of applications in terms of geographical area of the city, connection to larger organizations, and whether the activity specifically targeted one of BAB's "target groups." Toward the end of the microgrant scheme, subsequent outreach included targeted advertising, pre-application workshops, promotion through existing local organizations and closer communication with community development workers. The need for proactive outreach was reiterated by a local funding-related organization: *"If you're not getting the applications, it's not that the needs aren't there, it's that the intermediary doesn't have the capacity for one reason or another to build the right case in the right way to access the money."*

Accessible application process

The CKSF aimed to have a simple application process, accessible for those with no previous experience of applying for funding. As one group organizer reflected: *"Some groups don't apply for funding because too many things are asked on forms"* (organizer, pottery workshops).

As such, the scheme aimed to provide *"altogether a more friendly process"* (organizer, ballet group), which involved a five-question application form accompanied by guidance notes, transparent scoring criteria and contact information. Many award holders reported unexpected costs, for example, regarding marketing or transport, which they had not factored into their initial applications: *"I pay for all my own music. We were so excited to have funding for a barre and a studio that we did not think about music"* (organizer, ballet group). In these instances, BAB had a small discretionary fund available to make up for minor oversights in the initial costings.

Perceived impact on activity organizers and participants

Capacity-building

Award holders reported that the microgrant scheme helped to develop their skills of applying for funding. The scheme did not require applicants to be a constituted group, registered charity, have organizational policies or a bank account, which enabled a wider range of applicants to develop fundraising experience: *"Many of our group activities would not have got off the ground if there hadn't been the initial opportunity of Kick-Start funds"* (community development worker).

Moreover, activity organizers noted that the success of their microgrant application gave them the confidence to apply to other sources of funding:

> We applied [to a different funder] at the time we had been given Kick-Start and I think it is a vote of confidence if you can say to other funders, 'I already have support from other places' (organizer, pottery workshops).

Activity organizers also perceived that the focus on being accessible to people aged 50 + developed their ability to adapt activities to suit a range of different physical and cognitive abilities: *"We are constantly having to adapt exercises to someone who might not want to stand"* (organizer, dance group for people living with Parkinson's). Organizers described how they pre-prepared a variety of facilitation options so they could more easily adapt the content depending on who was in attendance. However, in some cases, organizers said they felt underprepared to respond to this wide variety of needs and abilities: *"[We] didn't anticipate the level of vulnerable members of the community"* (organizer, games café).

Organizers also reported acquiring important knowledge of the local environment and becoming more aware of existing groups and activities through the process of the microgrant. They noted that this led to increased contact with others operating locally and the development of informal networks between the organizers of different groups. For some organizers, these connections had a direct practical impact in the form of sharing equipment and other resources. For others, making these connections helped them to break

down stereotypes between organizations: *"It's a good community networking tool as well, because the more people who come here, they understand that we're not a care home, it's very different"* (organizer, intergenerational art group within Extra Care housing).

In addition to the group organizers, the microgrant scheme also appeared to contribute to developing skills, confidence and self-esteem amongst the participants themselves. As part of their sustainability plans, groups were encouraged to distribute roles and responsibilities between group members in order to avoid an over-reliance on one individual. Participants noted that this gave them the confidence to take a more active role within a group: *"Some learners have become teachers, this has strengthened the group and given them confidence"* (organizer, leisure activities for the Chinese community).

Taking on greater responsibility within a group appeared to develop a sense of ownership and an opportunity to "give back" in a way that was comfortable for them, without the formalities of applying for a volunteer position. However, organizers also highlighted that not all participants will want to help out with a group: *"Many people just want to come along, do their exercises, meet friends and go home"* (organizer, gentle exercise group).

Similarly, even with the help of volunteers, the process of becoming self-sustaining was easier for some activities than others. Activities requiring expensive materials or specialist input often had to introduce charges for attendees or close after the microgrant period. Some groups preemptively introduced an attendee charge during the microgrant period in order to build up a financial reserve that could be used to subsidize attendee charges in the future.

Social connection

Participants reported that the CKSF helped to create opportunities for them to find an activity of interest and meet others who shared this interest: *"[It] has brought different people together to work on different things; it's been a lovely merging and sharing of skills"* (organizer, "Men in Sheds" group).

Being able to set up their own group was perceived to be particularly important for individuals with more niche interests not previously catered for within the city. The diversity of activities established meant there were greater opportunities for people to try out new activities. Organizers also described making a proactive effort to foster social connections between participants, seeing it as part of their role to *"encourage people to talk together"* (organizer, social group hosting varied events), to *"help people mingle"* (organizer, singing group), to create a *"mutually supportive environment . . . [with] fun and informality"* (organizer, rowing group), in order to create a *"real community feel"* (participant, tai chi group).

Similarly, participants noted the particular impact these social opportunities had for those who lived alone: *"Many people who live alone said how nice it was to be able to socialise with other people"* (anonymous e-mail survey respondent).

For others, the activity provided an incentive to leave the house – *"it got me out of the house, when I would not have left it"* (participant, tai chi group) – and a structure to their week. This sense of structure emerged with even greater prominence in interviews conducted after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, including for activities taking place online; *"it gives me an anchor in the week"* (participant, creative writing group).

Participants perceived that attending activities funded through this scheme also had a wider impact on social connections beyond the specific activity *"as well as doing the singing they are finding out about other beneficial things" (organizer, singing group)*. For some respondents, the activity was a focal point from which wider social interaction expanded, first into casual acquaintances and then sometimes into friendships. For example: *"[A group trip] brought us together as a group, not just 'I come to class and I go away again'" (organizer, ballet group)*.

Award holders perceived that the social connections made through the microgrant-funded activity could sometimes inspire an increase in mobility and confidence to travel to other parts of the city in order to socialize with each other. It also appeared to give some participants the confidence to start attending other activities, as one group organizer noted: *"One person attends every week and walking has become 'part of her life.' So much so that she is now taking part in walks with other groups and has started to enjoy meeting people" (organizer, walking group)*.

However, group organizers also noted the challenge of fully knowing the impact of their activity. They perceived this to be partly due to stigma around loneliness: *"People are quite private so they don't say 'I'm lonely'" (organizer, ballet group)*. It was also the case that, as micro-level activities, organizers often did not have capacity to find this information out: *"We would let them know of any activity and would not track or monitor that" (organizer, games café)*.

Discussion

Through an extended and in-depth study of an urban programme to promote older people's community engagement, we sought to contribute to and extend existing understandings of the impact of microgrant schemes including elements of scheme implementation and conditions that may contribute to success.

Understanding impacts

Our findings support many aspects of the existing literature regarding the value of the breadth of activities resulting from this scheme and the creative thinking shown by applicants to make the most of funds available (Hargraves, 2018; Hartwig et al., 2009). As a bottom-up approach, the scheme generated a far broader range of ideas than would likely have been possible from one funding organization alone. As such, it helped to build social connections between local residents by providing greater opportunities for individuals to meet around shared interests.

In addition to the diverse range of activities, the scheme also appeared to lead toward a diverse range of impacts. Our study extends understanding of the impact on social connection (Ecorys and The National Lottery Community Fund, 2020b) by demonstrating the potential for wider social interactions beyond the funded activity. Through attending the microgrant-funded activity, participants found out information about other activities available and gained the confidence to attend. In some cases, it also inspired an increase in mobility and confidence to travel to other parts of the city, further expanding the impact of the intervention.

Our findings support suggestions in the literature that microgrant schemes build capacity by providing activity organizers with experience of making funding applications (Hartwig et al., 2009) and by creating connections between community groups (Caperchione et al., 2010; H. Johnson et al., 2006; Schmidt et al., 2009). In our study, these connections helped groups to share practical resources, learn from each other and build up a local knowledge base. They also had the indirect impact of challenging stereotypes that exist between organizations through a closer working relationship. Moreover, we extend these existing understandings of the impact on capacity-building by demonstrating that activity organizers gained skills and confidence in adapting their activities to suit individual needs. The scheme also developed the skills, confidence and self-esteem of activity participants by offering opportunities for them to gradually take on greater responsibilities within their group at a pace that was comfortable for them, without the formalities of applying for a volunteer position.

This diverse range of impacts raises the question of determining what counts as "success" for a microgrant activity. Some activities will meet their intended aims, whereas others may instead achieve impacts they did not anticipate; both must be considered forms of success. When such a large number of activities are funded, it is realistic to expect that some will not be successful; this acceptance is an intrinsic part of encouraging creativity and innovation. This presents the challenge of measuring impact in this context. Standardized monitoring processes within a microgrant scheme may not be able to capture the diverse range of impacts that can arise from these activities. However, tailored processes with personalized contact (Hartwig et al., 2006) are unlikely to be manageable for a funder to administer given the number of initiatives funded. As noted in the literature, it is also unrealistic for microgrant schemes to expect award holders who have received a relatively small amount of funding and are often volunteer-led to collect and return large amounts of data (Abildso et al., 2019; Campbell et al., 2000; Smith & Littlejohns, 2007). This was reflected in the low response rates for the quantitative questionnaires in this study. Moreover, the impact of an activity may not become apparent until after the end of a funder's monitoring period. Indeed, the informal drop-in nature of many activities may mean this impact never becomes known to the funder or activity organizer. Given this context, it is likely that individual activities will have impacts that do not get captured. As such, our case study suggests that although it is important to attempt monitoring and evaluation of individual initiatives, it may be more meaningful to consider the aggregate and systems-change impact of a microgrant scheme as a whole, rather than focusing on the "success" or "failure" of each activity. In addition, our study suggests that microgrant scheme impacts may be best understood as being "discovered" through implementation, rather than "prescribed" at the outset.

Understanding implementation

n terms of implementation, our study reinforces the importance of specific considerations in the design of microgrant schemes. Firstly, as Abildso et al. (2019) also recommend, microgrant-funded groups often need to be offered considerable flexibility to spend their allocated funds effectively. It takes time for activities to become sustainable and community-led, and our findings indicate that a longer funding period can help activities to progress toward this goal (see, also Vines et al., 2011). Our findings also support reflections

from Smeaton et al. (2009) and Thomson and Caulier-Grace (2007) regarding the value of outreach by microgrant schemes. While these schemes have the potential to reach marginalized communities, our findings indicate that outreach may be needed for this to happen; it is not something that schemes should take as a given. Moreover, while the outreach undertaken by this scheme successfully encouraged applicants from the targeted areas, further support was needed regarding the quality of these applications. Outreach conducted by microgrant schemes may therefore need to go beyond targeted promotion to include content-related support, and occur on an ongoing basis throughout the scheme.

In addition to supporting insights from the existing literature, our research also advances understanding of successful scheme implementation. The findings illustrate that comprehensive programme staff support may need to be offered both during the application process and throughout the funded period. While the support at application stage has been previously documented (Ecorys and The National Lottery Community Fund, 2020b; Hartwig et al., 2006; H. Johnson et al., 2006; Thomson & Caulier-Grace, 2007), award holders in this study also required *ongoing* support, coordination and encouragement. Central to this support was activity-specific advice about sustainability, helping to problem-solve unexpected challenges and, as noted in the existing literature, facilitating connections with other activities and services. Whilst this was an additional layer of programme cost, ongoing support contributed to the perceived success and sustainability of microgrant-funded activities and thereby helped to optimize the impact of the scheme.

Another important element of scheme implementation identified by this study was flexibility regarding how the funding could be spent. Microgrant schemes tend to cover the costs of goods rather than services (Smeaton et al., 2009), yet our findings suggest there is great value in having the flexibility to also fund services or a combination of the two. Doing so recognizes that not all activities are equally able to operate without the input of specialist expertise (for example, a qualified fitness instructor covered by appropriate insurance), and that flexibility in this area can further extend the breadth of activities available. Similarly, the unexpected costs encountered by some award holders indicate there may be a need for greater practical guidance in this area, for example, a checklist reminder of commonly requested items. However minor oversights cannot always be avoided, and our findings suggest it can be valuable to have the flexibility of a small discretionary fund available.

A key aim for this scheme was to be accessible for individuals and small grassroots groups with no prior experience of applying for funding. The short application form, clear guidance notes and easy availability of telephone support contributed to this aim. It is commonly accepted in the literature that activities funded by microgrants are community-led, rather than delivered by the funding organization (Deacon et al., 2009; Hargraves, 2018; Smeaton et al., 2009). However, our findings suggest a more nuanced understanding of "community-led" is needed in relation to microgrant schemes in order to fully understand who these schemes can reach. While all are located under the umbrella of "community-led," there will be significant differences in capacity and experience depending on factors such as the size of the group, staff-volunteer ratio, and connection to any "parent" organization.

Understanding organizational and community contexts

Our findings highlight the need to locate microgrant schemes within the surrounding organizational and community contexts. The reach and impact of this scheme was extended through the support of local community development workers, for example, concerning scheme promotion, application guidance and sustainability advice. However particularly vital was their role in building up individuals' confidence to apply, often through one-to-one support and encouragement over many months. The value of this support should not be underestimated and our findings align with Foster-Fishman et al. (2006) in suggesting that a reduction in capacity for these community development roles would likely also limit the reach and impact of a microgrant scheme operating in that area.

Similarly, voluntary sector support organizations may have the potential to enhance the impact of microgrant schemes. In the UK, the extent of support provided by these organizations varies widely between localities and tends to operate at a meso-level, in comparison to the micro-level of those based directly within a specific community. However, an active and well-resourced voluntary sector support organization could complement the support offered by community development workers and the microgrant scheme itself by providing opportunities for training, skill development, advice and, importantly, connections between local groups.

Microgrant-funded activities have the capacity to reach individuals who are not involved with other groups or services. Given the context of austerity, funding cuts and increased inequality, it is not surprising that in some cases these activities included participants considered to be more vulnerable, for example, due to having multiple complex needs. As such, it appears vital for these microgrant-funded activities to be supported by the appropriate organizational and community infrastructure to avoid placing a disproportionate level of responsibility on individuals who may not have the skills, experience or confidence to provide support.

In this way, microgrant schemes can be seen as one part of the community and organizational context necessary for building and maintaining connected communities. These schemes can simultaneously add value to local infrastructure while also receiving support from these same sources to collectively achieve a greater impact. As such, microgrant schemes should not be viewed as a replacement for other community initiatives or larger scale sources of funding, but instead as a complementary intervention. Although able to generate substantial benefits in a short timeframe, it is important not to view microgrant schemes as simply "quick wins"; it will likely take many years for a scheme to become embedded in a local context and for impacts to emerge. It is therefore valuable for microgrant schemes to operate as a long-running intervention.

Research limitations

While this research was based upon data from all award holders, 38 of the total 141 activities (27%) provided most of the in-depth information. It is possible that the findings could be influenced by the type of activities reflected in the research. Similarly, the nature of microgrant schemes means that many activity organizers do not have (or want)

systems for collecting data about their participants. The small, informal and community-led nature of these activities presents challenges for understanding the long-term impact for those who attend.

This study is based on one microgrant scheme operating in a UK city for a period of four years, with a particular focus on people aged 50 + . Schemes operating in a different context for a shorter or longer duration and with a different target audience may well have different experiences. However we believe our findings regarding the impact of this scheme, and in particular the elements of scheme implementation that contribute to success, provide valuable insights that can be used and tested in other contexts. Future studies may wish to explore the long-term impacts of a microgrant scheme on individuals and communities, including the relationship to other elements of the surrounding organizational and community context.

Conclusion

Microgrant schemes can play a valuable role in developing vibrant and connected communities and as such form an important pathway for community development goals. They are able to increase the diversity of activities available within a community while also building the skills and capacity of local groups and enabling individuals to make social connections. However, our case study suggests that the processes and support surrounding a microgrant scheme can enhance or detract from its impact and therefore it may not be enough to simply make the funding available.

In particular, our findings extend existing understandings of microgrant schemes as a pathway for community development by highlighting the following four considerations for scheme implementation. First, it may be valuable for schemes to have the flexibility to fund "services" as well as "goods." Second, working closely with community development teams and local voluntary sector support organizations may extend the reach and impact of a microgrant scheme. Third, outreach may need to go beyond targeted promotion to also include content-related support. Fourth, award holders may benefit from ongoing support and coordination throughout the funded period.

While our study explored the impact of a four-year intervention, microgrant schemes are likely to benefit from being in operation for a longer period of time. It takes a long time for knowledge about a scheme to spread through a community and for individuals to develop the confidence to apply. This is particularly the case for those who face multiple barriers to social participation and who may need substantial one-to-one support first. Microgrant schemes should not therefore be viewed as a replacement for other community initiatives or larger scale sources of funding, but instead as a complementary intervention that forms one piece of the puzzle. To enhance their role in community development, it is vital to pay close attention to scheme design, implementation and integration into the organizational and community context.

ORCID

Claire Chivers http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1798-3536
Amy Beardmore http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7492-2521
Mat Jones http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3692-8065

References

Abildso, C., Dyer, A., Daily, S., & Bias, T. (2019). Evaluability assessment of 'growing healthy communities' a mini-grant program to improve access to healthy foods and places for physical activity. *BMC Public Health*, *19*(1), 779. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-019-7156-8

Bobbitt-Cooke, M. (2005). Energizing community health improvement: The promise of microgrants. *Preventing Chronic Disease: Public Health Research, Practice and Policy*, *11*(2), 1–8. https://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2005/nov/05_0064.htm

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101.

Campbell, M., Motsinger, B., Ingram, A., Jewell, D., Makarushka, C., Beatty, B., Dodds, J., McClelland, J., Demissie, S., & Demark-Wahnefried, W. (2000). The North Carolina black churches united for better health project: Intervention and process evaluation. *Health Education & Behavior*, *27*(2), 241–253. https://doi.org/10.1177/109019810002700210

Caperchione, C., Mummery, W., & Joyner, K. (2010). WALK community grants scheme: Lessons learned in developing and administering a health promotion microgrants program. *Health Promotion Practice*, *11*(5), 637–644. https://doi.org/10.1177/1524839908328996

Center for Community Health and Development. (n d.) *Community Tool Box Chapter 44, Section 2: Establishing Micro-Grant Progams*. https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/finances/invest-in-community-resources/microgrant/main

Deacon, Z., Foster-Fishman, P., Mahaffey, M., & Archer, G. (2009). Moving from preconditions for action to developing a cycle of continued social change: Tapping the potential of mini-grant programs. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *37*(2), 148–155. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.20285

Durose, C., Beebeejaun, Y., Rees, J., Richardson, J., & Richardson, L. (2012). *Towards co-production in research with communities*. AHRC Connected Communities Programme. https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/files/33424282/FULL_TEXT.PDF

Ecorys and The National Lottery Community Fund (2020a). *Ageing better learning paper no. 5 microfunding: Empowering communities to create grassroots change*. Ecorys and The National Lottery Community Fund. https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/ageing-better/Ageing_better_learning_report_5_evaluation_report.pdf

Ecorys and The National Lottery Community Fund (2020b). *Ageing better learning paper no. 5 microfunding: Empowering communities to create grassroots change – existing evidence base and method note*. Ecorys and The National Lottery Community Fund. https://www.tnlcommunityfund. org.uk/media/documents/ageing-better/Ageing_better_learning_report_5_technical_report.pdf

Foster-Fishman, P., Fitzgerald, K., Brandell, C., Nowell, B., Chavis, D., & Van Egeren, L. (2006). Mobilizing residents for action: The role of small wins and strategic supports. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *38*(3–4), 143–152. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-006-9081-0

Hargraves, M. (2018). Learning from community-designed minigrant programs in the food dignity project. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, *8*(A), 117–146. https:// doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2018.08A.007

Hartwig, K., Bobbit-Cooke, M., Zaharek, M., Nappi, S., Wykoff, R., & Katz, D. (2006). The value of migrants for community-based health promotions: Two models for practice and policy. *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice*, *12*(1), 90–96. https://doi.org/10.1097/00124784-200601000-00015

Hartwig, K., Dunville, R., Kim, M., Levy, B., Zaharek, M., Njike, V., & Katz, D. (2009). Promoting healthy people 2010 through small grants. *Health Promotion Practice*, *10*(1), 24–33. https://doi.org/10. 1177/1524839906289048

Index of Multiple Deprivation. (2019). *National statistics: English indices of deprivation* 2019. *Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government*. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019

Johnson, H., Bobbitt-Cooke, M., Schwarz, M., & White, D. (2006). Creative partnerships for community health improvement: A qualitative evaluation of the healthy Carolinians Community micro-grant project. *Health Promotion Practice*, *7*(2), 162–169. https://doi.org/10.1177/1524839905278898

Johnson, D., Smith, L., & Bruemmer, B. (2007). Small grants programme: Lessons from community-based approaches to changing nutrition environments. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, *107*(2), 301–305. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jada.2006.11.011

Local Government Association (2016). *Combating Loneliness – a guide for local authorities*. Local Government Association. https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/combating-loneliness-guid-24e_march_2018.pdf

Mackintosh, S., Jones, M., Beardmore, A., & White, J. the BAB Community Researcher Group. 2020. *Towards an age friendly Bristol? Understanding the context and development of the Bristol ageing better programme*. UWE Bristol. https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/7235465

Muenchberger, H., Ehrlich, C., Parekh, S., & Crozier, M. (2016). The critical role of community-based micro-grants for disability aids and equipment: Results from a needs analysis. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, *38*(9), 858–864. https://doi.org/10.3109/09638288.2015.1065011

National Lottery Community Fund (n d.) *National Lottery Awards for All England*. https://www. tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/programmes/national-lottery-awards-for-all-england

Owens, J., Riehm, A., & Lilly, F. (2018). Social innovation microgrants as catalysts to community development in economically marginalized urban communities. *University of Maryland Law Journal of Race, Religion, Gender and Class*, *18*(2), 352–365. https://digitalcommons.law.umary land.edu/rrgc/vol18/iss2/6

Rippon, S., & Hopkins, T. (2015). *Head, hands and heart: Asset-based approaches in health care*. The Health Foundation. https://www.health.org.uk/publications/head-hands-and-heart-asset-based-approaches-in-health-care

Rocket Science (2013). *Awards for all evaluation: Main report*. Rocket Science and Big Lottery Fund. http://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/-/media/Files/Research%20Documents/er_a4a_main.pdf

Schmidt, M., Plochg, T., Hartwig, J., Klazinga, N., & Stronks, K. (2009). Micro grants as a stimulus for community action in residential health programmes: A case study. *Health Promotion International*, *24*(3), 234–242. https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/dap017

Smeaton, D., Vergeris, S., & Ray, K. (2009). *Small grants thematic evaluation (UK wide)*. The Policy Studies Institute. https://www.academia.edu/34449749/Small_Grants_Thematic_Evaluation_UK_Wide

Smith, N., & Littlejohns, L. (2007). A case study in community grant funding: Lessons learned. *American Journal of Health Education*, *38*(4), 242–248. https://doi.org/10.1080/19325037.2007.10598978

Tamminen, K., Faulkner, G., Witcher, C., & Spence, J. (2014). A qualitative examination of the impact of microgrants to promote physical activity among adolescents. *BMC Public Health*, *14*(1), 1206. https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-14-1206

Thomson, L., & Caulier-Grace, J. (2007). *Improving small scale grant funding for local voluntary and community organisations*. The young foundation. https://youngfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Improving-Small-Scale-Grant-Funding-for-Local-Voluntary-Community-Organisations-July-2007.pdf

Timmermans, S., & Tavory, I. (2012). Theory construction in qualitative research: From grounded theory to abductive analysis. *Sociological Theory*, *30*(3), 167–186.

Van Rooyen, C., Stewart, R., & De Wet, T. (2012). The impact of microfinance in sub-Saharan Africa: A systematic review of the evidence. *World Development*, *40*(11), 2249–2262. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2012.03.012

Vines, A., Teal, R., Meyer, C., Manning, M., & Godley, P. (2011). Connecting community with campus to address cancer health disparities: A community grants program model. *Progress in Community Health Partnerships*, *5*(2), 207–212. https://doi.org/10.1353/cpr.2011.0027