The Mercers' Company
Homelessness Deep Dive : *Executive Summary*
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Introduction

This independent evaluation presents learning from 21 projects that have been awarded grants through the Mercers' Church & Communities Programme [1]which support people who are, or have recently been, homeless. It draws on various data including: existing research and policy data on homelessness; existing project information from Mercers'; semi-structured interviews with project stakeholders. It seeks to describe the approaches taken, the collective difference made and the lessons learnt in order to help inform Mercers' ongoing approach to funding in this area. This executive summary distils the contents of the following three documents:

- **'Part 1: Understanding the Landscape: what we need to know about evaluating Mercers' homelessness projects'** outlines the evidence base, the approach taken and the projects funded.
- **'Part 2: Findings Report: What We Know Now'** presents the analysis and conclusions from the evaluation.
- **'Part 3: Summary Conclusions Recommendations and Opportunities**.

General conclusions

This funding programme is already delivering significant social benefit. All projects are delivering work which is: good quality; impactful and of value; relevant and broadly consistent with the research and policy evidence base; and which reflects both Mercers' general principles and values, and the priorities for this specific programme.

The full value and impact of the programme cannot yet be assessed, because the majority of projects are still underway, and some have just begun. Moreover, this has been an exceptional year because of COVID-19, so that some findings of this evaluation may be untypical or unrepeatable. On balance, the evidence suggests that the programme would be *more* impactful under more normal circumstances. Overall, the members of the Church and Communities Committee can feel very satisfied with this work.

Key findings 1: The Projects' values, approaches and delivery models

The 21 projects used a variety of delivery models and offered a range of activities including; night shelters; advice and support around 'rights' (e.g. welfare, housing and legal); help to develop independence and personal skills; signposting/referrals; and 1:1 case work. Approaches taken by projects shared common features in that they are person-centred, inclusive and holistic; focused on relationship building; strength-based. These approaches are evidence-based and already known to be effective in addressing the needs of homeless people, focusing on minimising known risk factors (e.g. poverty, unemployment, living in rented accommodation, mental illness and social isolation) and promoting protective factors (e.g. supporting 'connectedness' and support networks,

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[1] Projects were funded by Mercers' Charitable Foundation and the Charity of Sir Richard Whittington.

education/learning), which are known to help prevent homelessness. Other identified key strengths of projects were seen to be; working in partnership with other agencies; the skills, approach and commitment of staff and volunteers; the ability to provide specialist advice and support.

14 of the 21 funded projects were delivered by faith-based organisations and a strong set of core values, closely aligned to a Christian ethos, were held across all projects. Core values were compassion, trust, respect, acceptance, generosity and hope. Delivery models were shaped by these values and the needs of beneficiaries and their locality.

Key findings 2: Outcomes and impact

The programme as a whole is making a valuable difference to the lives of homeless or recently-homeless people. A total of 79 different intended outcomes were specified across the 21 projects (mean number 3.76) in their outcomes frameworks. Almost all outcomes (74/79; 94%) were intended to have a positive impact directly on homeless people. A small number (5/79; 6%) were intended to impact indirectly, for example through training staff or affecting the wider housing and homelessness system.

Projects are working towards a wide range of positive impacts, including on homeless people's health and wellbeing (15/79; 19%); employment and skills (12; 15%); independence and personal development (11; 14%); connections with community and family (9; 11%); and welfare and legal rights (7; 9%); meeting crisis needs (5; 6%) ; providing longer-term accommodation and housing (8;10%). **Figure 1** below shows the breakdown of types of outcome across the projects. 15 projects also told us about unplanned outcomes. These were either direct (impacting homeless people e.g. More homeless people connected to agencies who can help) <u>or</u> indirect (relating to staff or system changes e.g. staff and volunteer training); and similar to outcomes that other projects had planned for <u>or</u> were uniquely different.

Fig. 1: Types of outcomes across projects
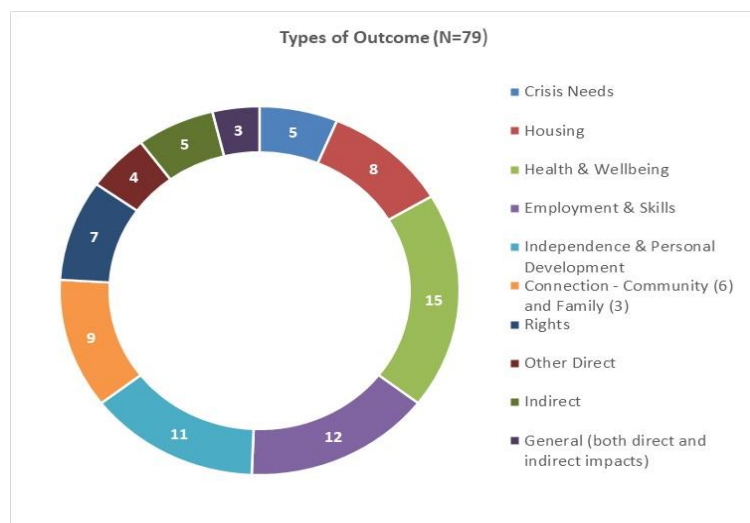
The outcomes projects were working towards are generally consistent with what is known about homelessness, the risk and protective factors affecting individuals, and 'what works'. Some identified gaps in the funding portfolio include support for homeless women and projects seeking to tackle structural or policy issues.

The programme as a whole delivers good value and social benefit, making a real difference to homeless people and those at risk of homelessness. Considerable **social value** is delivered through mechanisms such as; tackling exclusion and strengthening connections; preventing escalation of needs; supporting behaviour change; working in partnership to avoid duplication of services.

Most projects reported that their outcomes were only partially met, usually because they are still in progress and/or because of effects from the Covid-19 epidemic; no projects said they had achieved all their outcomes. This evaluation therefore only gives a partial and interim picture of the impact of the funding programme as a whole. There were some further issues relating to measuring and evidencing outcomes which are discussed in Part 2 of the evaluation.

Key findings 3: Challenges

COVID-19 has significantly challenged all projects to some degree by raising costs, increasing demand, reducing capacity and so leading to increasing service pressures. Other challenges reported included: issues in recruiting and maintaining volunteers; sourcing funding; and working with beneficiaries who have complex and multiple needs.

Key Findings 4: Working with Mercers'

All projects had a positive experience of working with Mercers' and highly valued their relationships with Grant Managers. Projects really appreciated the funding they received without which, some would not have been viable. Projects considered Mercers' monitoring and reporting requirements to be reasonable and proportionate.

Key findings 5: Learning and the future

Projects' reported a variety of learning from their work. Learning was linked to their stage of development and their experiences of COVID-19. Other learning related to how best to work with particular target groups; the need for flexibility and adaptability to deal with ever changing needs; the importance and value of volunteers; the benefits of having strong partnerships. Most were interested

in knowing about the other projects and they were all keen to hear about the results of the evaluation. There was a mixed response and some reservations about actively engaging with other projects.

Organisations were optimistic they would continue to deliver their projects after their grant from Mercers' has ended, but they expected COVID-19 to continue to affect their delivery, and were concerned about future funding.

Opportunities and Recommendations

The findings of this evaluation present a number of opportunities open to The Mercers' Company:

1) Continues to fund projects whose outcomes are impactful and whose approaches are evidence-based and effective, using the evidence from this evaluation to inform their decisions, including the research and policy review;
2) Continues to fund in a flexible way, responding to what projects need and – particularly in light of COVID-19 – allowing them to have the best chance of mitigating the potentially challenging issues that are likely to continue to arise;
3) Supports projects to understand, identify and articulate their intended and actual outputs and outcomes (and the differences between these), without increasing the monitoring and reporting requirements;
4) Considers co-developing tools with projects that specifically enable them to tell their own stories and articulate their outcomes and impacts, for example through case studies and theories of change, so that this kind of insight is captured more routinely;
5) Shares the evaluation report with all the projects funded, and considers further opportunities for facilitating shared learning across the portfolio (including learning about responses to COVID-19);
6) Further evaluate outcomes that are actually delivered, when considering the impact of individual projects and the programme as a whole, rather than (as currently) those that are planned;
7) Considers identified gaps in the funding 'portfolio', and takes a view on whether or not to target some new investment accordingly;
8) Considers wider promotion of this funding programme, particularly to fill the gaps in the portfolio;
9) Considers commissioning a further piece of work that focusses on social value in more detail.