The Mercers' Company

Homelessness Deep Dive

Final report

Part 3*:* Summary Conclusions and Recommendations

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Part 3: Summary Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary Conclusions

See also Part 2 for discussion and examples informing these conclusions.

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.

It is significant that we can see that the projects had a real impact on people's lives, even when they did not deliver the outcomes that had been agreed in advance. It seems that their value-driven and person-centred approaches enabled them to respond both flexibly and powerfully to changing needs and circumstances. Mercers' approach to grant management - with its strong commitment to relationship building and flexibility, rather than strict insistence on measuring outcomes and outputs – appears to work well.

The full value and impact of the programme cannot yet be assessed, because almost all 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. However, we think the evidence suggests that the programme would be *more* impactful under more normal circumstances: despite restrictions, projects delivered much of what was agreed and/or reasonable alternatives, plus additional outcomes, but nevertheless told us they had been limited in what they could achieve. Overall, the members of the Church and Communities Committee can feel very satisfied with this work.

Values, faith, approaches and delivery models:

There were strong core values widely held by organisations and underpinning projects regardless of whether they were delivered by faith based or non-faith organisations – including respect, trust and hope. Approaches taken by these projects are already known to be effective and appropriate in addressing the needs of homeless people – especially: person-centred, inclusive and holistic approaches; relationship building; strength-based approaches. Delivery models were shaped by projects' values, faith and approaches, but also by their clients' needs and their locality.

Challenges, including COVID-19:

COVID-19 was the most frequently described challenge, and has affected all the projects significantly – in most cases raising costs, increasing demand, reducing capacity and so leading to increasing service pressures. We anticipate that these pressures will continue. Other challenges reported included: issues in recruiting and maintaining volunteers; sourcing funding; and working with clients who have complex and multiple needs.

Outcomes and impact:

21 projects (representing almost £1.4M investment) are working towards 79 agreed outcomes with a wide range of impacts. All these have or will have a positive impact, so that the programme as a whole is making a valuable difference to the lives of homeless or recently-homeless people. Additionally, 15 projects also told us about unplanned outcomes, which add value and include some potentially ground-breaking work. Most projects are still underway, so we anticipate that the programme will go on to have further impact.

There is considerable social value delivered through this funding programme, but for some projects, there was a limited ability to articulate their understanding and awareness or varied capacity to evidence social value; some projects would benefit from a better understanding of their wider social impacts. Tools such Theories of Change or more detailed case studies may help projects to understand and articulate their impacts and social value more effectively.

Both service pressures and good practice may lead some projects not to deliver agreed outcomes; this is not a shortcoming, and Mercers' flexibility is appreciated.

The outcomes that were agreed with projects are generally consistent with what is known about homelessness, the risk and protective factors affecting individuals, and 'what works'. In a few cases (those categorised as 'other direct') outcomes were agreed that are not necessarily evidence-based, but a relatively small amount of variety allows for work that is potentially ground-breaking. However, there are some identifiable gaps in the funding portfolio as a whole, including support for homeless women and projects seeking to tackle structural or policy issues.

Working with Mercers':

Projects were complimentary about their experiences of working with Mercers' and highly valued the funding they received – without which some would not have been viable. Monitoring is considered reasonable and proportionate and relationships with Mercers' staff are valued.

Learning and the future:

Projects' learning was linked with their stage of development and their experiences of COVID-19. Most projects linked their key learning with their experiences of COVID-19. Other learning related to how best to work with particular client 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 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.