



Evaluation of Grants: Church & Communities and Older People & Housing Programmes

Executive Summary (2024)

Evaluators

Kerry Swain, Sarah Frost, Kathryn Crowther and Sue Cook

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the first-year findings of a 5-year programme-level evaluation 2024-29 of projects funded by Mercers' Charitable Foundation, the Charity of Sir Richard Whittington and Earl of Northampton through two funding programmes: Older People & Housing; and Church & Communities.

1.1 PURPOSE

Mercers' commissioned the evaluation to evaluate the Church & Communities and Older People & Housing programmes in relation to its new Impact Framework. The purpose is threefold: to identify lessons that could be learnt (by charities, the Mercers' Company, and other funders); present this in the wider context of funding and issues faced by communities and older people within England; and inform Mercers ongoing approach to the programmes.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

Evaluators used a mixed methodology, gathering data through project monitoring information (both applications and progress reports), an online survey of 99 projects, 35 in-depth interviews with project leads and six case study visits. 149 grant-funded projects were included in the evaluation in Y1 (91 Church and Communities, 58 Older People and Housing). A thematic focus on skills and employment was also included within this year's evaluation.

Alongside the formal evaluation, funded projects were offered related learning activities devised and delivered by the evaluation team: online and in-person meet-ups, and an online resource space.

1.3 FINDINGS

1. Activities, delivery, approaches, and values

Most projects were funded over three years, the average amount granted was £81,000 and the majority of grants were used for core funding. Projects used a range of delivery methods and approaches with Church and Communities projects providing more targeted, one-to-one support than Older People and Housing projects, which provided more group-based activities.

Common across both programme areas were approaches that were value-based. They involved understanding the people being supported and their needs: meeting them 'where they are at' and working with them in ways they wanted; building positive relationships through developing trust and building rapport with people; and actively listening to people's voices to ensure that their situations and needs are fully understood. Other approaches included asset or strength-based, person-centred, and holistic approaches, trauma-informed practices, and peer support.

Key success factors were often about 'how' the projects were delivered: providing a welcoming, supportive, informal, and safe environment; consistent, dedicated skilled staff to help build trusting relationships; being responsive, flexible, and inclusive; working collaboratively in partnerships; and the volunteers' role in project delivery.

The main challenges identified for projects in both programme areas were high demand (more people than anticipated needing support; and beneficiaries needing higher levels of support and having more complex needs), and projects costing more to run. Other challenges were also resource-based: attracting and retaining skilled staff and volunteers, lack of time and resources, reduction in funding available, and experiencing more competition when seeking funding.

Wider structural and systemic issues also posed problems for some projects: the cost of living and housing crises, and changes to government policies and legislation.

1.1 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all the projects taking part in this evaluation for their time, willingness and enthusiasm. A full list of funded projects can be found on the [learning space](#) for the Evaluation Learning Team.

A special thank you to the projects who participated in the case studies

- 999 Club
- LEAP
- The Junction
- Dragon Hall Trust
- Norfolk Community Foundation
- Third Age Project

2. Outcomes and impact

All projects were (or were on track to be) making a positive difference to people's lives and many reported that they were already achieving multiple outcomes. Survey results showed the most frequently met project outcomes were: improvements in people's wellbeing; people feeling more connected with each other; and health gains. A range of other outcomes were more specialised and related to the needs of specific target groups, issues, or communities. Most projects were collecting both quantitative and qualitative data to help demonstrate impact, and user feedback to inform service improvements going forward. Some projects reported finding it difficult to describe and evidence their outcomes.

3. Skills and employment – this year's thematic focus for the evaluation

Although improving people's skills and employment opportunities was not a major focus for most projects, many projects in both programme areas did deliver adult learning activities, often centring on personal growth, skills development, and increasing confidence and self-esteem. Most of the learning was either non-vocational or basic skills, or both, and included physical activities, arts and crafts, cookery, and other life skills. This often had a positive impact on people's health and wellbeing, and longer-term outcomes. A small number of projects did provide vocational learning, often delivered in partnership with training providers, while others signposted beneficiaries to relevant projects to access learning opportunities.

The main challenges faced by beneficiaries in gaining skills and employment opportunities were a lack of self-esteem, low confidence, and mental health difficulties. A lack of required qualifications or poor previous experiences in education were found to be barriers. Projects felt strongly that people learn better through informal activities and that individuals benefit most when given the opportunity to choose what and how they learn.

4. Working with the Mercers' Company

Projects were very positive about their experience of working with the Mercers' Company. They found grant managers approachable, knowledgeable, understanding of their needs, and there was an open channel for communication and support when needed. Most project leads said the application and reporting processes were straightforward and less arduous compared to some other funders. The flexibility of the funding, being able to use the funds towards core costs, multi-year funding, and the opportunity to reapply, were seen as extremely positive and contributed to sustainability of the work.

5. Learning from the projects

Evaluators asked projects to consider what they had learned from their delivery of the work. In addition to the approaches described in section 1, the projects described better understanding the demands of the work on staff and volunteers, the importance of recognising and valuing their skills, and the crucial role volunteers played in delivering the projects. They said that project management had to build in flexibility, remain agile, and be open to change; that working in partnership was important to their success; and that being more proactive and less reactive made for more successful delivery. They recognised that quality engagement with beneficiaries required outreach, building in enough time, transport, and using accessible communication tools. Using co-production had helped some to implement ideas from beneficiaries into project design, consultation had helped them to understand their target groups better and guided provision.

Opportunities for Mercers' to consider

1. **Continue to offer multi-year funding** for at least three years to allow projects more time to plan and embed their work and provide more stability.
2. **Continue funding core costs**, allowing projects flexibility to respond to the changing needs of the people they are supporting, and actively promote this at the EOI stage.
3. **Consider increasing the size of grants** to acknowledge both increased running costs and increased demand for support.
4. **Extend the Wellbeing Funding offer** to the Older People and Housing programme projects and showcase the benefits of this more widely across the portfolio.
5. **Consider providing evaluation support to funded projects** potentially through common outcomes and indicator sets or training in relevant skills.
6. **Encourage increased use of co-production** techniques for projects through involving beneficiaries in project design, delivery, and evaluation.

The Mercers' Company
6 Frederick's Place,
London EC2R 8AB
020 7776 7200