Community First Summary Report.

**Introduction:**

Community First is an £80million government-funded initiative, running for four years until March 2015.

The programme helps communities come together to identify their strengths and local priorities in order to plan for their future and become more resilient. The programme aims to support local projects that improve the quality of life for local people, promote a sense of ownership and local opportunities and resources, start more neighbourhood groups and revitalise existing groups and introduce a new approach to funding projects.

National Coordinator is CDF their role is to check all funding recommendations to ensure they are eligible. CDF manages the Community First programme on behalf of the Office for Civil Society. They are not responsible for funding decisions. Upon return of the grant acceptances CDF authorises payments to be made to the funded groups. CDF are responsible for chasing groups to provide the monitoring and evaluation as part of the conditions of funding. This is required at the end of the project

**Manchester Community First Panels.**

Each Community First panel has received an allocation of funding for each of the four years. The allocation for each year was made to panel partners at the start of the funding programme. 18 areas in Manchester were eligible for this funding because of levels of deprivation and the numbers of new benefits claimants according to government statistics. Each Panel had to agree ward priorities for their local area, through a process of consultation with residents, local businesses and the local ward regeneration teams.

To run a programme each ward had to establish a community first panel. These could function independently or could be supported by a panel partner.

The role of the panel partner is to support and advise panels in regards to the eligibility requirements and ward priorities for that area and to publicise the funding programme. Macc has taken on the additional role of collating applications, monitoring of amount allocated (so panels do not over allocate), supporting panels to award funding appropriately, ensuring fair and reasoned decisions are made, managing conflicts of interest, handling funding questions, processing applications and acting as an advocate between applicants and CDF if any difficulties arise.

Macc was originally asked by MCC to be panel partner to 13 of these panels and now support 8 Community First panels across Manchester.

The five panels in Wythenshawe are supported by Wythenshawe Community Housing Group as these panel felt the needed their support to be based in the heart of their community. As Wythenshawe Community Housing Group had a representative on all 5 panels this made them a good choice to be panel partner.

**The make- up of the Panel**

Each Manchester Community First panel has a minimum of three panel members that must include at least one local resident or business person, a ward coordinator and a local councillor. They can have more members. Most panels have more local residents as there was significant interest.

The make-up of the panels meant that decisions were informed by local knowledge.

Panel members are also able to promote the funding within their local communities.

Successful applicants are asked to keep the panel members informed on their progress. This had a positive effect on the panel members, who could see the positive impact their volunteering on the panel had on their local area.

**Types of groups who have applied for funding.**

Types of projects that have successfully applied for funding are;

* Friends of canals group
* Mental health peer support group-
* Friends of parks group-Community days
* Resident’s groups- Litter clean up days.
* Road safety awareness garden
* Skating projects for young people- equipment
* Intergenerational gardening group
* Young people football project
* Activities for young people (to divert them from antisocial behaviour).
* Homework clubs
* Social activities for isolated older people.
* An amateur dramatics group
* A dementia café

**Case studies**

**Moston**- This North Manchester panel has supported a local project Nephra, which started as a group of residents getting together to clear a communal space which had become a dumping ground. After this they were overwhelmed by the response from local residents who requested more local activities be provided and this group was established. Now his group provides a luncheon club, social activities for older people, mums and toddlers groups, an allotment, arts and crafts, film club and even a cookbook from recipes provide by local people. This group is planning to develop into charitable status over the next few years.

**Ancoats and Clayton**- This East Manchester panel supported a local mental health service users group, who had no income and had just been told that they would have to pay to rent the meeting room they had been using for free for the last few years. They couldn’t afford to do this as they did not charge users to attend and so applied to this Community panel for support. The panel viewed this project as a much needed support for service users experiencing mental health for peer led support groups.

**Bradford** – This panel were unanimous in agreement in support a road safety awareness project. The Friends of Road peace Garden was developed after the founder’s 21year old daughter was killed in car accident by a drunk driver. The project was created to raise awareness about what impact car crashes have on the family and friends of those involved. Most of the work of this garden is for young people involved in crime and ASB to make them think about consequences of their actions to also to raise awareness to all motorists and remember those who have been killed.

**The application process.**

This process was relatively simple but like all processes it had some challenges. Most of the information is available online even though the application forms and guidance as available by post if needed and Macc was contactable if there was any difficulties.

**Conflict of interest.**

As the funding panel were made up of local people active in their community and local councillors, there were many occasions that a conflict of interest would arise. The panel partner’s role is to manage this and we have do so by asking all panel members to be honest and disclosing their association with a groups submitting an application. Panel members with a conflict of interest are asked to refrain from voting or being involved in the consideration discussions. However, groups associated with panel members are made bids, which at times gave rise to questions about conflict of interest, even when these were not judged by the person with a conflict of interest.

**Challenges**

* The panels should be community led panels, but this takes time and confidence with IT systems to collate applications, liaise with CDF and with applicants. The panel partner’s role is vital one. The ideal situation is that the panel partner would empower the panel to take on this sole responsibility but with time constraints and with the level of commitment this role takes, this would be difficult.
* The panel requires local knowledge and experience of the area as well as the needs of the local community. This requires panel members to be constantly updated have the necessary information to make good decisions or they may feel disengaged. Often because many panel members are active members of their community they have lots of commitments and they meet remotely which decreases the feeling of being part of a team.
* Applicant groups need to be regularly updated regarding their applications, as often the development of a new project will be reliant on sourcing funding. The panel meetings do not always happen quickly (until there are sufficient applications to bring a panel together).
* Delays in receiving funding from CDF
* Lack of publicity of the funding programme. It is often the case that it is the groups most in need of funding that are not aware this funding is available. There is limited funding available for publicity and panels are required to publicise this themselves.

**Overall impact**

Community First funding has made a positive impact in the local community, as it has led to increased involvement of residents to help develop local projects, finding out more about what happening locally and championing their local area of Manchester. Community and voluntary sector projects have benefited not least in gaining confidence by securing funding and establishing or expanding their projects but in developing ideas and working with other groups and services and encouraging volunteer participation. The end of Community First Programme will be felt in the local communities but it will have left a legacy of what is achieving using small funding to make big changes and I believe that the majority of groups will continue to grow.

**The Future**

At present there are no plans for continued funding.

Appendix 1:

**Eligibility for funding**

* be a not-for-profit, third sector voluntary or community group
* be connected with and/or meeting the needs of the local community
* have a bank account with 2 signatories OR nominate an organisation which has a bank account with 2 signatories to hold funds on its behalf
* have a governing document New groups are not required to have this in place, but should agree to develop one.
* provide evidence of significant community participation in their application through the group’s matched element to the project
* show that their project is in line with the priorities identified for