COSAF:
final evaluation report

Summary of learning
and
case studies

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May 2015

Summary of learning from across all five projects

1. Introduction

The Community Organisers Social Action Fund was set up in the autumn of 2014 by the Cabinet Office's Centre for Social Action in order to help to develop some of the most promising community-led social action projects arising out of the Community Organisers Programme, so that they would gain the experience to become sustainable and grow. The Programme supported four small and one large Community Organiser inspired and supported projects to:

- Test, develop and evidence a range of social action projects delivered by communities for communities;
- Add to the evidence base of community led social action projects in addressing challenging social issues;
- Add to evidence base of the value of the Community Organising approach in England in innovative, transformative and sustainable ways.

The funding was given over a six-month period ending March 2015. Smaller projects were funded to the tune of up to £20,000 each with the aim of helping them develop their business model and test the delivery of new sustainable enterprises or services which benefit local communities. The larger project received £100,000 to enable it to successfully grow delivery and access mainstream funding/investment opportunities in 2015. The hope was that the funded projects would act as exemplars of the power of Community Organising to address important social issues.

Imagine – who are the learning advisers to the Community Organisers Programme - were funded as independent evaluators through support for project self-evaluation and some external evaluation oversight. It adopted a theory of change approach to the evaluation, which involves identifying long-term outcomes and then working backwards with stakeholders to identify the necessary pre-conditions in the short and medium term (what change do we want to see?) and the evidence that needs to be gathered to assess whether these have been achieved (how will you know if you are going in the right direction?). All projects have been encouraged and supported to design their own project theory of change, which helps all those involved to better understand what it is they are trying to do, how they will do it and how they will measure progress and success. To this end, Imagine facilitated two day-long workshops for all five projects to help them develop their individual theories of change, the evidence they needed to gather and the methods they might use and supported this through individual project visits, evaluation guidance materials and telephone and email exchanges.

2. The starting point

The overall theory of change started from the premise stated in the Social Action Fund brief that 'many existing Community Organiser supported projects are small-scale, under-developed and not robustly evaluated, but do have the potential to become sustainable and grow'. The short- to medium-term outcomes it identified over the six months of the Fund were that:
- new kinds of community-generated solutions would be developed;
- the five projects would have tested a locally driven enterprise and developed a business model;
- each project would have an evidence base around the process and impact of their fledging enterprise;
- the projects would be in a position to apply for more substantial funding in line with their business plan;
- evidence would be created to show the value of community organising and social action in addressing locally identified social issues.

Outcomes for the longer term beyond the six months of the fund were identified as:
- new enterprises and forms of investment, creating new social and economic opportunities;
- more financially viable and sustainable activities;
- resident-led change that makes a difference to local communities and the issues they raised at the outset.

The following five projects were selected by the Fund, from a total of 34 applications. They address a range of issues from social isolation and dementia, through housing and poor local image, to unemployment, poor access to job support and low aspirations (for example among young people). To do this they have used innovative approaches that include the intensive training and enterprise development of the Organisation Workshop, using IT through intergenerational work to address the stereotypes and stigma faced by both young and older people, and pioneering a community owned lettings agency as one route to restoring local pride and positivity in the area, as well as adopting holistic intensive approaches to unemployment and minor crime and the revival of library and book swop facilities to create a community hub.

Large grant recipient
Marsh Farm Outreach Organisation Workshop (cohort 1)
The Marsh Farm Organisation Workshop (OW) is a radically different, enterprise-based approach to community organising. Marsh Farm Outreach has been developing its understanding of the approach for five years and the Social Action Fund grant has been used to support it in implementing what will be the first OW in the UK for 5 years. The OW uses a process called 'Large Group Capacitation' and involves a minimum 40 participants, drawn from the local community, in an eight-week 'pressure cooker of learning by working together'. MF Outreach is already functioning as a 'Facilitation Enterprise' and the first phase of the OW was planned for February 2015. Marsh Farm Outreach are bringing in expert advisers and trainers from Chile to support the OW.

Small grant recipients

DT5 Trust CiC, Portland (Cohort 3)

DT5's aim is to provide a coherent framework to support unemployed people into more positive and productive lifestyles. It intends to achieve this through a project that will provide: digital inclusion; mentoring; life skills coaching; work skills training; supported work experience and facilitation of the only Volunteer Work Placements facility in Portland. Their hope is that this will lead to greater self-esteem, active citizenship and, in due course, permanent employment for local people and especially young people. They have used the Social Action Fund to help pay for premises, equipment and expertise.

Mothertown Books and Social Centre, Burslem, Stoke on Trent (cohort 8)

The aim of this project is to address social isolation in a community that has been depressed by the collapse of local industry and the failure of housing market reform by providing a social space for people to meet and social activities to develop in the old Burslem School of Art, a landmark building that is now underused. The Social Action Fund grant has been used to open a library and resource centre in the building, which will provide social, study and reading space and computer facilities, as well as a books and a swop shop. There are plans to open a community café alongside the library and encourage other groups to use the building as well as to share information on what is going on locally. Little free libraries are also being placed in strategic locations around the town for people to borrow and swop books.

Pioneer Properties, Margate (cohort 9)

This project aims to regenerate and renew neighbourhood community pride in an area of Margate that has been neglected and is stigmatised through setting up a community-run lettings agency – Pioneer Properties. Pioneer Properties aims to increase the quality of private rental sector housing in the Cliftonville West and Margate area. With the support of the community organiser, local volunteers have engaged extensively with local residents and businesses as well as local and national voluntary organisations, housing associations and national trade associations. The Social Action Fund has covered the costs of local surveys and market research, venues for meetings and a high profile workshop, and paid for some of the development work, including the employment of a Lettings Officer.

Unity Project (under the umbrella of Kissing it Better), Gillingham (cohort 9)

This is an intergenerational project whereby young people (local school students under the age of 16) listen to the stories of older people, (particularly those with early onset dementia) and help them to produce digitised pictorial life stories. Kissing it Better has used the Social Action Fund to develop an app to allow people's stories to be uploaded so that they can be shared with family and friends as well as helping to re-orientate people living with dementia. Additional outcomes include effective communication and understanding between generations, informal and formal learning and education for the students, and reduced isolation of older people.

3. The case studies

A case study on each project is in Appendix 1. These cover the background to the projects and how they build on the community organising process, what they did, how far they achieved their aims, the value of social action and evidence relating to change and future sustainability.

4. Reflections on the achievements of the fund

Were the objectives achieved?

4a. Test, develop and evidence a range of social action projects delivered by communities for communities.

The Social Action Fund allowed local community organisers and volunteers to develop a range of ideas into tangible projects and to begin to test their feasibility. The Marsh Farm Outreach Organisation Workshop was already well developed but in the other cases the funding acted as a spur to evolve and firm up what were sometimes embryonic ideas. This has also allowed the Community Organisers Programme to reach more community members and engage more people in the work that paid community organisers and local volunteers are taking forward.

The Fund enabled:
- Marsh Farm Outreach to run the initial stages of its Organisation Workshop with 45 participants and with the support of an expert on the process from Chile.
- DT5 to take a lease on an underused community centre, purchase equipment and bring in expertise to develop a digital platform that allowed people local access to job search, skills training and support.
- Mothertown Books and Research Hub to equip its library (the books have been donated) and employ co-ordinators to work with and train up the volunteers, many of whom are new;
  > *Volunteering is great but if you are developing something you need someone who can put the time in that is needed. What COSAF funding has done is give us time to test out whether the library will work, whether it is needed, whether people will help out.*
- Pioneer Properties to carry out community and market research into the need for, and viability of, a community based lettings agency. New people have engaged with the project, contributing to a team of over thirty volunteers. It has tested out the model e.g. provided a volunteer support worker to work with vulnerable families facing housing problems, has developed a business plan and started to identify potential funders.
- The Unity Project to build relationships between young and older people, develop a digital storybook app, test the feasibility of a

community café and use the evidence from this pilot project to garner promises of financial support for roll out from two organisations, Medway Community Healthcare and the Guinness Trust.

As such, the funding has released new local resources and assets – both personal and material in the areas covered. It has allowed for:
- the involvement of more community members in both the development of the projects and in their running;
- the purchase of materials and equipment for use by local people;
- in some cases, the paid employment of local people in taking the project forward;
- necessary external expertise to be brought in.

It has also helped to establish the legitimacy of emerging local projects with external agencies and partners, which has given local communities access to additional new expertise and resources. Outstanding examples are the Job Centre in Marsh Farm, and both council services and individuals with a wide range of very relevant housing experience in Pioneer Properties.

In these ways, it has extended the impact of the community organising work on which the projects were based.

Less tangible but equally important are the benefits in terms of:
- reputation – both of local activity and of the local area itself (an important aim in both Margate and Stoke);
- potential - once the space for development is created, as one respondent said: 'new ideas pop up all the time'.

How involved were community members?
All the projects have required at least the support, if not the driving force, of the original community organisers. But that's not to say that communities haven't been involved, indeed it is probably true that COSAF has enabled a much greater community ownership and development of the project than would have been the case otherwise:

- Marsh Farm Outreach are all community members and they have recruited a broad range of participants into the OW;
- DT5 involves people from ages 16-50, and has a core group of 12 volunteers who have developed the space and tested the website. They have learnt and used community organising skills (e.g. listenings) as well as project management and more practical skills such as venue preparation and cleaning.
- Mothertown Books and Research Hub involved six volunteers in th design and development of the library.. But now that the library is open it has employed co-ordinators with strong local connections, who are driving the project with 15 new volunteers, who will be taking on more responsibility as they gain in confidence and skills;
- Pioneer Properties has involved over 30 local residents and others with particular skills and knowledge, many of whom are completely new to the project;

- Unity is without doubt driven by the CO but also involves older people, young people and paid staff at the school and the care home.

4b. Add to the evidence base of community led social action projects in addressing challenging social issues

The issues addressed by the projects have been wide-ranging: social isolation, unemployment, housing and area decline, stereotyping – of areas but also between generations. These are not issues that can be addressed in six short months. This means that the evidence we have is limited – numbers of people so far involved, anecdotal evidence of the impact on individuals, physical evidence of buildings improved and made available for local use, the existence of an app and evidence of its use. In Marsh Farm, we also have the evidence of numbers successfully completing training; in DT5 we have evidence not only the large numbers of people who have made use of the facilities but also directly attributable employment outcomes; in Mothertown Books and Research Hub, we know that the library is attracting new users and events and that people are meeting who would never have come together in any other way; and in Pioneer Properties and Unity, there is the existence of an embryonic enterprise that is attracting the attention of funders because it is meeting need in new and imaginative ways.

What COSAF has also illustrated, though, is the way in which communities can take some control over services that affect people's everyday lives and improve them – making them more sensitive and relevant to local communities. They are achieving something that public agencies have failed to do. In Marsh Farm, for example, people who have been left with little confidence of ever being in meaningful employment are now thinking about opportunities for enterprise. And in Margate, Pioneer Properties, even in its fledgling form, is providing support to vulnerable tenants and mediating with (often unsympathetic) landlords. It is also turning an area with a disreputable image into somewhere that people feel proud to live in. In neither case, could these activities have been conceived of, or led, by anyone other than the communities themselves. Pioneer Properties is also creating new projects to engage young people and address accusations of antisocial behaviour. While in Portland, DT5 is saving people significant amounts of money through community provision of freely available internet access. In Burslem, the Mothertown Books and Research Hub has filled the gap left by the closure of the public library some years ago and provided internet access not available elsewhere. And in Gillingham,, Unity is evolving into a creative grassroots project based on the slow build of relationships between young and older people.

4c. Add to the evidence base of the value of community organising approach in England in innovative, transformative and sustainable ways.

These are all projects that have emerged out of community organising. They have resulted from listening to local residents with forward agendas for action. Most were underpinned by the community organising process (though in Marsh Farm, residents have been trying to drive the OW forward for many,

many years). It is unlikely that any of them would have happened without community organising, and in all cases, continued support from the community organisers (who are also the residents in Marsh farm) has been essential to sustaining and developing the projects.

The enthusiasm and drive in all the projects is impressive but particularly innovative has been the work of Marsh Farm Outreach and Pioneer Properties. Both these projects are pushing the boundaries of voluntary action: Marsh Farm Outreach is trying out an untested creative and collective process that aims to respond directly to those community members who have struggled for years to find meaningful employment; and in Margate activities that started out as 'soft' project responses to listenings about the need to improve the area e.g. gardening activities, have led to an ambitious but well researched social enterprise development.

5. Learning

If there was to be another round of the Fund, several lessons have emerged from the experience so far. Some derive from the fact that the time for the development of an eligible project, for application and selection and for the achievement of the aims was too short. But there are also lessons about support and evaluation. A further round would therefore greatly benefit from the experience so far.

Project selection and aims
More clarity was needed about what the Fund was intended to achieve. Imagine suggested the following. These were:
- The community group needs to have strong foundations
- The project needs to be deliverable in 6 months
- The project should help them develop a clear business case
- The proposal needs to be forward looking and developmental
- The proposal needs to have a good chance of surviving beyond the next 6 months.

In retrospect, some of the projects selected are more 'innovative' than others, but it is far too early to say how transformative any of them will be in the longer term.

The projects were also expected to demonstrate a good geographical spread, to reflect the diversity of initiatives that were emerging from the CO Programme and have the capacity to be evaluated over 6 months in a way that would produce really useful learning. There is certainly a diverse range of initiatives, though the geographical spread could have been wider and the scope for evaluating the wide-ranging aims outlined above were always going to be limited.

Timescale
Without COSAF, our assessment is that these projects would not have happened; at best they would have taken longer to come to fruition.   A

significant amount has been achieved, but it often took longer than anticipated to get going – even in Marsh Farm, where the plans were the most longheld and the most advanced. On the other hand, DT5 found that the short timeframe created a sense of urgency which meant that they had to be focused, and following one big disappointment that could have set them back, the rush to complete created a momentum that was helpful.

For some projects however, the spending timeframe was not only too short but also didn't necessarily match the ideal timeframe for the projects. In Marsh Farm for example, the timeframe meant that the project had to be implemented before residents were quite ready. The grant dictated the timing of the process and to some extent this not only got in the way but undermined the integrity of the process. Other projects would have liked more flexibility:
> *COSAF has been a smooth process, but it needs to be more flexible…*
> *And people need to know it is flexible when they fill in the forms*

Pioneer Properties have suggested that funding milestones attached to phased funding would have been useful e.g. an initial grant to reach an agreed stage of development, followed by an amount of money that could be used over a longer term. As it was, any paid roles created were on extremely short contracts which doesn't help with recruitment and retention of workers. On the other hand, Mothertown Books, knew the kind of staff they wanted at the start and have therefore have been able to use COSAF to pay co-ordinators for the best part of a year

Support
Locality received no funding allocation for this and the little support that was available therefore had to come from the evaluation team. Some projects like DT5 valued the fact that COSAF was 'hands-off' and they were allowed to get on with the job. Others found the discipline of designing a theory of change a useful process - e.g. in Gillingham it was also used for planning the community café - while DT5 and Pioneer Properties found the critical friend role played by Imagine very helpful. But projects have also said they were looking for a greater degree of mentoring support and signposting to funding development and business planning resources.
> (we) *felt quite daunted - the process of applying for the money, and then getting it, was very fast. People had been inspired by the community organising process and said 'go for it', but then they felt they were given the money without much support.*

Imagine provided this where it could but we are aware that there is much more specific expertise 'out there'. What this meant was that those running the projects were to some extent working in a vacuum and that a great deal depended on the COs, for whom this scaling up of a project may have been a whole new learning journey, and who in some cases were also supporting other unrelated projects. One CO (who has valued the support that was available) has said she would have valued a mentor right from the start, a menu of expertise to draw from and some pooled resources e.g examples of business plans for community enterprises and financial forecasting models. While Marsh Farm Outreach were able to bring in significant external support,

But, more mentoring and support for the smaller projects would, we believe, have would have had significant benefits in terms of project planning and sustainability.

Sustainability
COSAF aimed to provide some resources to help fledgling projects that had grown out of community organising to scale up to the point where they would be in a better position to attract the longer term investment required. Attached to this aim is an outcome about sustainable social and economic development. However, sustainability isn't built in six months, nor is it possible to evidence it. The projects have certainly been given a 'leg up' and have all met the challenge with a great deal of energy and have resulted in broader community involvement and greater community ownership. That is apparent in every case. What is less clear is for how long that will be the case, or indeed what sustainability means.

Self evaluation
It has been difficult to put in place robust evaluation frameworks. The projects were still working on these relatively recently, being more concerned with delivering a new project by March. This was in part because at the start evaluation was seen by some as an additional task and a distraction, rather than part and parcel of project planning and as an essential component of generating collective understanding of the project (by the end project participants were much more favourable to the idea). The consequence of this was that they could only really focus on inputs and outputs, rather than outcomes. Some outcomes have been achieved as we can see in the case studies, but there has been little time to collect the evidence in a coherent way.

In the end, projects have provided what they could in the form of evidence but on the whole done little overall analysis of that information themselves. This was probably an ask too far – some have reams of stories, anecdotes, survey findings, photographs etc but haven't had the time to pull it together into a coherent study or the headspace to reflect upon all of it.

Imagine has therefore taken on the job of pulling together lots of pieces of information and evidence. This was however still a challenge, as evidence is still being collected. More time to evaluate the action that the 6-month start up period made possible would provide for greater analysis and learning. Indeed, DT5 have suggested that it would be better to evaluate the projects after 6-9 months as at this stage it is too early to demonstrate impact, and because independent feedback further down the line would be really useful.

6. The implications for future funding initiatives

COSAF has been invaluable to those who have been part of the programme:
> *We have found the funding invaluable and would like more community organising based projects to have the same opportunity; this takes it to another level. Don't get to this level in 1 year of organising.*
> Pioneer Properties.

The learning generated through the evaluation however, leads us to make the following suggestions, if OCS wishes to consider something similar in future:

- **Realistic criteria**

A further round should consider how realistic the aims of the fund are within the timescale available, and have more realistic ambitions.

- **A longer application period.**

Imaginative projects have emerged, but a very short application window increases the chances that applicants will go for something they can just take off the shelf rather than pushing the boat out. In fact, Marsh Farm Outreach had been planning to run an Organisation Workshop for many years and their ideas were the most developed, but even they needed more time for preparation. This was all the more true for the other projects.

- **Funding**

More clarity about the use of COSAF. Projects have not always been clear about how the grant can be used, or indeed, whether how much flexibility there is to vire across or change budget headings as the project evolves. This would be useful information for the bodies holding the money as much as for the projects themselves. If government wants to provide grants to volunteers who may not be a constituted group at the start of the project then the organisation that is accounting for the money also needs some clarity about use of the fund, and its own role in that process.

- **A phased funding process.**

Government could fund a larger number of projects for a development phase to work up their proposal. This too might increase the chances of innovative, more risky proposals. It could then select a small number of projects for longer term funding, based on the planning and developmental work they have already done and realistic prospects for sustainability.

- **Support**

Several projects have valued the support they received but would have liked more of it. The application and selection process took place over a very short time frame and so projects hardly had time to think before they were 'plunged in' to activity. Projects have mentioned more intensive support at the start, more face to face time in the funding relationship e.g. a mentor / critical friend, along with a menu of specialist support, a workshop where people can learn about funders and funding options, and a bank of useful resources.

- **Sharing the learning**

These projects are the product of a particular community organising process and also of their particular contexts. But while their models and ways of working may not be replicable as such, they would certainly be of interest to others and could well stimulate interest in developing similar ideas elsewhere. We would therefore recommend that OCS consider how the learning from these projects be communicated to others.