Community First Neighbourhood Matched Fund

Evaluation Summary Report

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1 Evaluation summary

1.1 Introduction

This summary presents an overview of findings from the evaluation of the Community First Neighbourhood Matched Fund programme. Ipsos MORI and NEF Consulting were commissioned to conduct an evaluation of the programme by the Cabinet Office. The same team is also evaluating the Community Organisers programme in recognition of the close relationship between the two programmes.

Evaluation work began in October 2012 and runs until March 2015. The programme has been evaluated to understand process effectiveness and the social impact achieved. The evaluation included both primary and secondary data collection and analysis. The core aspects were online surveys of Panel members and those leading funded projects, longitudinal community-based case studies, and analysis of management information and secondary data. As such, this report is based on both quantitative and qualitative data.[1]

This summary focuses on assessing process effectiveness and social impact and is aimed at providing feedback to key stakeholders on the lessons for similar interventions. The final full report will provide more detailed findings in answer to the evaluation questions, as well as providing the analytical underpinning for these assessments.

1.2 Programme overview

Community First (CF) is an £80 million programme to fund new and existing community groups. Community First has two parts, the Neighbourhood Matched Fund and the Endowment Match Challenge. The Endowment Match Challenge is outside of the scope of this evaluation.[2]

The Community First Neighbourhood Matched Fund is a small grants programme targeting deprived wards. The programme is designed to address the four overarching problems listed below:

1 The value of community assets and volunteering are not fully or adequately recognised by local communities or traditional grant funding.

2 Local communities do not have enough influence over funding decisions affecting their neighbourhood.

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[1] Further details of the methodology are available in Appendix 1.
[2] Throughout this report we refer to Community First (including using the acronym CF) in relation to the Neighbourhood Matched Fund element of the programme only.

3 Community groups and projects face barriers to accessing small grant funding.

4 Government funding is not leveraged effectively enough to support community groups and projects.

The Community First programme builds on the Asset-based Community Development (ABCD) approach, which uses the resources, abilities and insights of local residents to address problems, while still offering outside assistance in a support role[3]. Crucially, the programme takes a devolved, light touch approach throughout its design.

Community First has the following features:

- **Decision making is local** – around 600 Community First Panels, made up of local people, set funding priorities and decide which projects should receive funding in their area.

- **Funding is matched** – every £1 provided by the Government must be matched by at least the same amount in donations, which can be cash, services, free products or volunteer time.

The expectation is that the promise of matched funding encourages people to give time, expertise and resources towards projects that address needs in their local area. In this way government funds have been used to stimulate local action in neighbourhoods with significant deprivation and low social capital.

The Community First programme is delivered through a combination of central administrative and support functions delivered by the Community Development Foundation (CDF), local decision making by Panels of volunteers, and further support and oversight for each Panel provided by a Panel Partner (typically a local voluntary or community organisation).

The Panels established a Community First Plan including priorities for their area, and then used these priorities to make decisions about projects that applied to receive funding. The programme uses an online system, developed by programme delivery partners CDF, for managing all key aspects of programme delivery.

Just under £30 million in grant funding has been made available to Community First Panels across the four years of the programme. Panels identified and recommended projects for funding of up to £2,500 in line with agreed priorities. All grant funding was matched by the community.

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[3] http://www.engage.northwestern.edu/ABCD/index.html

Panels were required to engage the local community in the programme and ensure transparency by updating a dedicated website (and other channels where possible).

The fourth and final round of funding is all but complete by March 2015; all Panel funding recommendations have been made. Projects were due to finish by the end of February 2015 and monitoring forms should be submitted by the end of March 2015.

1.3 Process effectiveness – summary findings

The Community First programme incorporates three distinct process elements:

1. **Establishing Panels and priorities** – setting up Panels and establishing priorities for funding decisions.

2. **Local outreach and decision making** – raising awareness of the funding opportunities, identifying projects for matched funding, receiving and reviewing applications, making funding recommendations.

3. **Programme oversight and central administration** – administrative, support and monitoring mechanisms.

The evaluation findings provide evidence about the effectiveness of these three process elements, with analysis examining how well the programme has delivered its intended outputs, including establishing the Panels and the number and value of matched funding grants made.

1.3.1 Establishing Panels and priorities

The evidence shows that, despite some challenges, the implementation of the Community First programme has worked well at a local level. Panels were established in almost all the local areas selected, and have made £27.3 million in funding recommendations to 18,055 projects. This has yielded over £94 million in matched funding, including just over £17.5 million in cash match, and over five million volunteering hours.[4]

As a result of significant effort from the Young Foundation and CDF, a large majority of Panels had functioning websites by Year 3 of the programme, and almost all Panels had a signed off Community First Plan – these were key mechanisms for ensuring local transparency and involvement.

> You've got to be confident enough to say 'this is the reason you didn't get it, and you didn't do this and this'. You can point to them to the website so they can see what was missing.
>
> Panel member

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[4] Funding recommendation and matched funding figures are based on total recommendations submitted to CDF at the end of January 2015 and are subject to revision. These figures do not, therefore, necessarily reflect the actual amount of grant funding received by funded projects or the matched resource realised as a result of this – but they represent the most accurate assessment that has be made.

Evaluation evidence indicates that the programme successfully delivered funding against local needs. Community First Plans were co-developed with communities – written with the input of experienced individuals based on existing evidence, as well as additional consultation with the community to identify community priorities. There is also good evidence that the priorities outlined in Community First Plans have been addressed through the projects funded. Indeed, the overall progress in making funding recommendations demonstrates the demand for small grants relevant to the priorities set by Panels.

Nine in ten Panel members (91%) said that the applications they received were always or very often relevant to the priorities set. Where project applications did not meet the relevant priorities, Panels were clearly confident about rejecting them on this basis; three in five (60%) said that at some point their Panel had done so.[5]

1.3.2 Local reach and decision making

Panel members were positive about the main processes they were involved with, and this generally improved after Year 1 as Panels became more familiar with the programme and their role. They were especially positive about making funding decisions (see Figure 1.1). Indeed, there was a near-unanimous view that this process had worked well (97% of Panel members said it had done so). Panel members were also very positive about receiving and reviewing applications.

Figure 1.1 – How well the processes worked for each year of the programme (Panel members)

Overall, how well, if at all, did each of the following processes work in Year 1, 2, 3 and 4 of the programme?
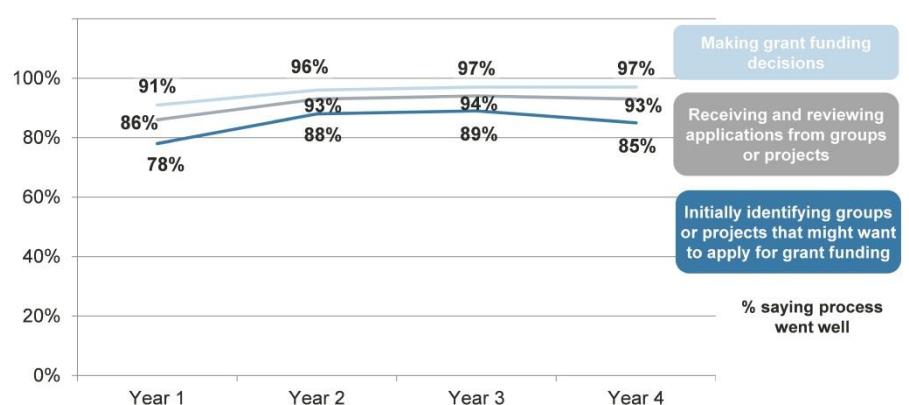
Base: Year 4 survey 229 Panel members; fieldwork November – December 2014; Year 3 survey: 185 Panel members; fieldwork May – June 2014; Year 2 survey 446 Panel members; fieldwork June – July 2013

Source: Ipsos MORI

Initially identifying projects that could benefit from Community First funding was the aspect seen as most difficult. Although not seen as a major issue, qualitative feedback suggests that some Panels were less clear on how to find and reach suitable projects, particularly beyond those they already knew about. As such, an important way projects were identified was by

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[5] Base: Year 4 Survey, 229 Panel members, September – November 2014

Panel members leveraging their existing networks. Four in five Panel members (80%) said they had done so in the final year of the programme.[6]

As the programme progressed Panels also used more direct methods including press releases or publicity in local newspapers (see Figure 1.2). Searching for suitable projects on the internet or using local directories also increased over time, with one in five using this approach by Year Four.

Indeed, by the final year, local publicity had become a more significant way to reach potential projects. This was increasingly through Panels' own websites (62% used this approach) – though evidence from the survey of project leads suggests that Panel websites were most useful once projects had already heard about the programme.[7]

It is clear that many Panels worked hard to promote the programme more widely in their communities; as a result, a large majority of Panel members (88%) said they had received applications from people they did not previously know.[8]

In the case studies, some Panel members reflected that the lack of funding for communication activities within the programme was a barrier to reaching beyond their existing networks – a lesson for future programmes.

> We contacted local schools and community centres and found out which groups were using them, and then contacted the groups to see if they were interested in applying
>
> Panel member

Figure 1.2 – Methods for identifying groups/projects in Year One and Year Four of the programme (Panel members)

How did your Panel identify groups/projects that might benefit from grant funding in the first year/ final year of the programme?
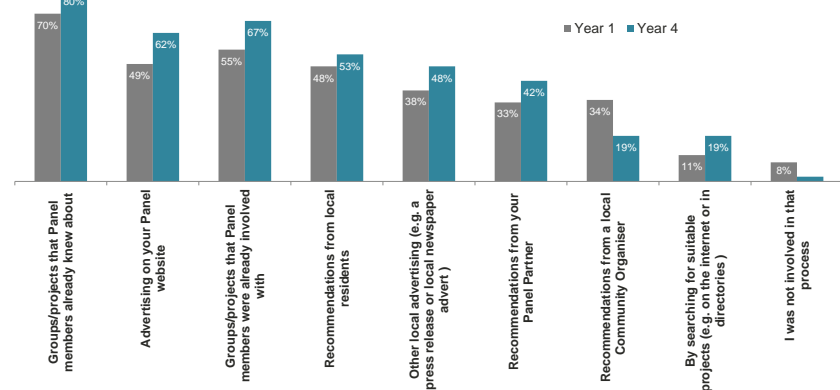
Base: Year 4 survey 229 Panel members; fieldwork November – December 2014; Year 2 survey 446 Panel members; fieldwork June – July 2013

Existing experience and networks have been important to the success of the programme. Many of those involved have been willing to go beyond what they understood to be the basic requirements of their respective roles. Panel members with community development experience and Panel Partners have in many cases provided a great deal of administrative support and other guidance to less experienced Panel members and

[6] Base: Year 4 Survey, 229 Panel members, September – November 2014
[7] Base: Year 4 survey, 952 Projects, November – December 2014
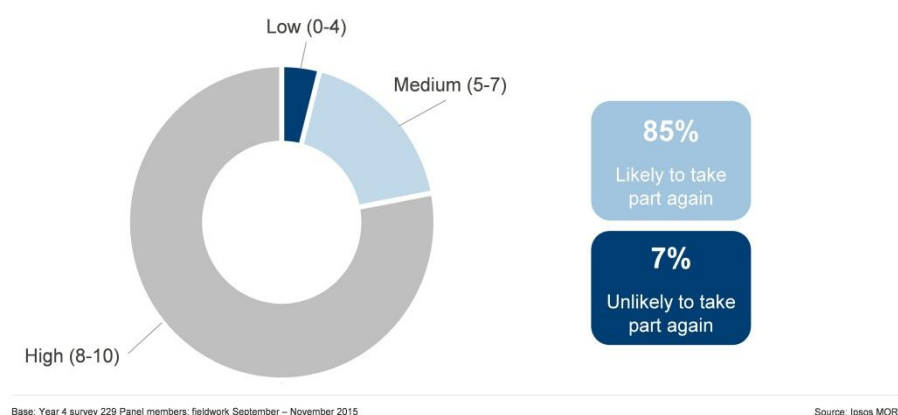[8] Base: Year 4 Survey, 229 Panel members, September – November 2014

projects making funding applications. Leveraging and better recognising existing networks was an important aspect of the rationale for the programme.

A large majority of Panel members (78%) found taking part in Community First very worthwhile and even more (85%) said they would get involved if a similar opportunity arose again. Only a small number (7%) said they would be unlikely to do so (see Figure 1.3).

Once awards were made by Panels, all project monitoring was conducted centrally. In a few case studies, Panels members said they would welcome greater responsibility for monitoring the success of the projects funded through the programme –. Some ongoing local role for Panels might have provided additional useful feedback to Panel members on their decisions. However, not all would have welcomed this additional responsibility.

Figure 1.3 – How worthwhile they found taking part, and likelihood to do so again (Panel members)

Overall, how worthwhile have you found being a Panel member on your local Community First Panel? Please answer using a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is 'Not at all worthwhile' and 10 is 'Completely worthwhile'?

Low (0-4)

Medium (5-7)

High (8-10)

85% Likely to take part again

7% Unlikely to take part again

Base: Year 4 survey 229 Panel members; fieldwork September – November 2015   Source: Ipsos MORI

> Community First has been a brilliant programme for people in this area because it gives them the help, support and encouragement they need to get involved and take an active part in their community.
>
> Panel member

There is evidence that for a minority of the individuals involved, the programme entailed a larger commitment than they had envisaged. Some said that there was not enough support (both locally and centrally) and that had resulted in them or others feeling overburdened by the programme.

The reliance on experienced individuals means that administering the programme has been more difficult in the absence of good local support. Furthermore, attracting new people to become involved (as Panel members or by applying for funding) was more challenging, particularly as there were no specific mechanisms within the programme to encourage this. However, there were examples of Panels successfully broadening their reach in order to recruit new Panel members and encourage new projects to apply for funding. For example some formed partnerships with schools, community centres and other local organisations.

> We're really proud that our organisation enabled £80,000 investment into the local area... but we'd have to think really carefully about how we would allocate the staff time against it [in the future].
>
> Panel Partner

1.3.3   Programme oversight and central administration

At the core of the programme's design is the use of an online system that allows for a low cost and light touch approach to central administration when compared with more traditional offline approaches. A key programme assumption is, therefore, that an online administration system is suitable for this programme and does not present a significant barrier to those with lower levels of digital skills/experience, and in fact might promote digital inclusion.

The evidence suggests that the online administration system has usually been manageable for those participating in the programme, either due to their own existing skill levels or via support from other programme participants. Of the Panel members who had themselves used the online system, around two thirds (64%) said they found the requirement to complete forms online easy, while around one in five (22%) said they found it difficult.[9]

Support with the online system was often required for both funded projects and Panel members. This has come from different sources, including CDF, Panel Partners, and Panel members (the latter particularly for projects).

"I found (the online administration) really refreshing, most of the time it's worked really well... some people struggled and we've guided them through the process."
Panel Partner

There is also evidence of increased confidence in IT skills linked to involvement with the programme. Fewer than half (46%) of Year Four project leads said they had been highly confident using websites and other IT before applying for Community First funding. In the same survey, the proportion who said they were now highly confident using websites and other IT was almost two thirds (64%).[10]

Even so, there are some examples of online administration being difficult for both Panels and projects, and it should be noted that, particularly for projects, the evaluation methodology allowed us to reach those who have been successful in navigating the online requirement.

"CDF assumed people have PCs at home and some groups don't so have struggled with the paperwork."
Panel member

Where central or local support has been received this is generally viewed positively, including from CDF. However, there were some frustrations among Panels about perceived changes in how specific aspects of the process worked as the programme continued. Qualitative feedback

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[9] Base: Year 2 survey, 220 Panel members, May – July 2013
[10] Base: Year 4 survey, 952 Projects, September – October 2014

suggests there was also a perception in the final year of the programme that CDF became harder to contact as the specific staff involved changed ahead of the end of the programme.

Finally, Panel members and projects felt there was at times a lack of clarity around decision and payment deadlines. This led to added stress, particularly for project applicants from smaller groups with no funding reserves to draw on.

"You hear you've got the money, you book the hall then... you still haven't been paid and you cancel the hall and lose your deposit. We've had projects that... had to dip into their own money to fund it."
Panel member

1.4 Social outcomes – summary findings

The Community First programme was designed to have positive impacts on direct programme participants and the wider community as a result of programme and grant funded activities.

The evaluation findings provide evidence about the extent to which the intended outcomes have been realised and the key success factors and barriers to doing so.

1.4.1 Individual outcomes – Panel members and funding applicants

The evidence is that both Panel members and project leads applying for funding have experienced improvements in skills and knowledge needed to effectively self-organise and address local needs (see Figure 1.4).

Figure 1.4 – Personal impacts on knowledge and confidence (Projects Year Four)

Projects answering highly (between 8 and 10) when asked about their knowledge and confidence before and since starting work with the Community First Panel
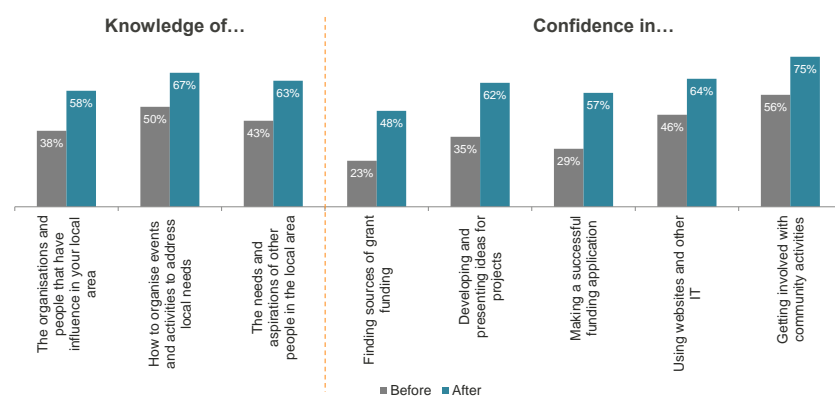
Base: 952 funded projects; fieldwork November – December 2014   Source: Ipsos MORI

Panel members often already had relevant skills and experience, but they felt being involved with Community First has benefited them. In particular, there is evidence of increased confidence around making funding decisions and improved knowledge of, and working with, the local community. The programme has also built confidence among successful projects, increasing the number of community groups working together, and encouraging them to apply for funding from other sources.
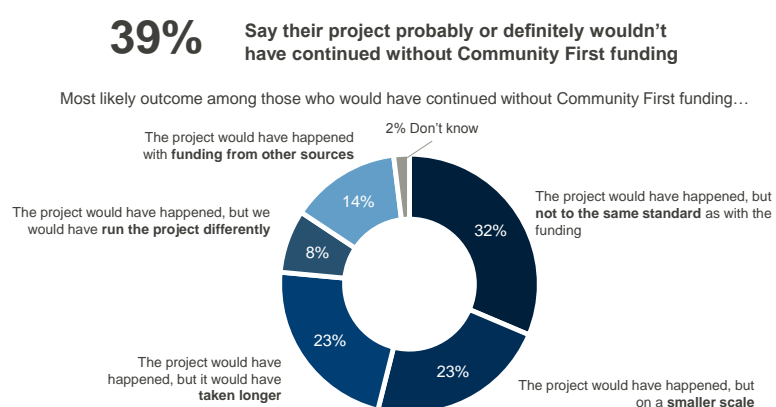
1.4.2 Community outcomes – community activity and impacts on the local community

Community First matched funding also helped to generate new community activity and use of resources. There is evidence of some new groups being formed, as well as allowing organisations to start new activities, or improve or extend their existing activities, for example by involving new people.

Funding has focused predominantly on existing groups, with Community First grants in many cases used to sustain existing activity, especially important during the economic downturn and subsequent recovery over which the programme ran. Overall, 92% of applicants were from existing groups. However, 45% of projects said that the funding helped them begin completely new activities.

Without funding, two in five projects (39%) said their project would not have happened at all; most of the remaining projects would have happened to a lower standard or smaller scale (see Figure 1.5). As such, the programme was an easily accessible way for small community groups to *extend* the local impact of their work, at a time when they felt funding and other local resource opportunities were more difficult to secure.

Figure 1.5 – The importance of securing Community First Funding (Projects Year Four)

39% Say their project probably or definitely wouldn't have continued without Community First funding

Most likely outcome among those who would have continued without Community First funding…

2% Don't know

The project would have happened with **funding from other sources** — 14%

The project would have happened, but **not to the same standard** as with the funding — 32%

The project would have happened, but we would have **run the project differently** — 8%

The project would have happened, but it would have **taken longer** — 23%

The project would have happened, but on a **smaller scale** — 23%

Base: Year 4 survey 952 funded projects / 573 funded projects who say they would have continued without CF funding; fieldwork November – December 2014   Source: Ipsos MORI

Many individuals benefited from the activity the programme has encouraged, through a wide range of projects designed to meet local needs and through strengthened community connections. Much of the

activity funded by Community First can be categorised as addressing the factors that drive well-being, predominantly around connecting people together and encouraging people to volunteer.

Panel members and projects are broadly positive about the impact in their local area resulting from the programme: 74% of Panel members felt that strong links between groups were more common in their area (69% of projects); 71% of Panel members felt it was more common for people to have the skills needed to organise activities (63% of projects); and 76% of panel members felt it was more common for new people to get involved (75% of projects).[11]

1.4.3   Sustainability

A key question for assessing social impact is whether the incremental changes experienced by individual community members and strengthened local networks are enough to catalyse longer term outcomes. There are positive indications about the impact Community First had on individuals and communities. However, Panel members in particular raised concerns about whether this is sustainable without the funding Community First provides. At this stage it is not possible to be sure whether or not any of the changes observed will be sustained beyond the lifetime of the programme.

Programme participants are positive about their future involvement in similar activity, in part reflecting their prior experience and involvement. Indeed 68% of projects leads said they were certain their group would continue working together in some way.[12] They are also positive about the impact the programme has had on key skills, confidence and social capital. However, Panel members, in particular, have some concerns about the energy levels and availability of community members to continue these projects in the future.

While Community First funding has been welcomed, particularly by funded projects, both Panels and projects argued that there is a need for continued local small grants to meet local needs. This was seen as particularly important given the perceived challenges in securing small grants funding locally.

1.5   Key findings and lessons learnt

Overall, the evaluation findings indicate that the Community First programme delivered against its intended outputs, despite initial difficulties, and generated positive perceptions among programme participants about its impacts on individuals and the wider community. The light touch, devolved approach adopted by the programme appears to have worked

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[11] Base: Year 4 survey, 229 Panel members, September – November 2014 and Year 4 survey, 952 Projects, November – December 2014
[12] Base: Year 4, 952 Projects, November – December 2014

and to be appropriate in ensuring the majority of the small grants funding available reaches community groups and projects that address locally determined needs.

1.5.1 Demand for funding and core programme targets

The success of the programme and the evaluation findings show that, overall, there is demand for small grant funding. However, there has been a relatively small shortfall in the amount of recommended funding reaching projects. Furthermore, the demand has varied across local areas. While many Panels had applications for more money than they had available, some have struggled to find sufficient groups/projects to allocate all of their funding.

The programme largely fulfilled its core targets for the number of operational Panels, Panel websites and Community First Plans. This involved considerable input from individuals and organisations within the programme locally and centrally, including from CDF and via additional support and training provided by The Young Foundation.

1.5.2 Community First processes

Both Panel members and funded projects generally felt the application and decision making requirements and processes worked well, including the online administration system. As would be expected, there are indications that for some the online approach has been a barrier, although it has not possible to measure the extent of this within the scope of the evaluation.

Websites and social media were not always effective channels in raising awareness of the programme in Community First areas. Of much greater importance have been recommendations and existing relationships. Even so, Panel websites have clearly been useful for those seeking information about making applications.

Some of the success of the programme is a reflection of the simple approach adopted by Community First compared with other small grant funding programmes. Core requirements for Panel members and projects alike were simple enough that there were, overall, sufficient programme participants who are able fulfil them.

1.5.3 Community assets – the approach

Community First builds on the Asset-based Community Development (ABCD) approach, which is based on the principle of identifying and unlocking the existing assets within a community to address need, rather than focussing on tackling deficits through a centrally determined approach. Community First adopts a localised, devolved approach to the ways in which needs are addressed and adapts the typical ABCD approach to work within the programme's light touch administrative system.

In particular, the programme does not incorporate an initial asset mapping stage. Rather, the programme utilises the input from Panel members, some of whom have prior experience in community development, and existing evidence about needs in the local community, to set priorities for funding.

The evaluation evidence highlights positive examples of how the programme has benefitted from existing assets, such as local residents involved in community development professionally and as volunteers, or focal points like community centres and associated networks, to identify needs within the community and attract applications from projects to address these. These were a key success factor within the programme as they help with communication and raising awareness. They also mean that Panel members, as volunteers, were able to attract projects within their available time, skills and knowledge.

1.5.4   Community assets – local people and organisations

Feedback through the evaluation highlights that key individuals and organisations have taken on significant responsibility for administrating the programme. While this may have helped to increase other programme participants' skills, evidence about how widespread this onward impact has been felt is limited.

Support with administration and processes has often come from Panel members who have existing community experience, perhaps working in a community development role for the local council, or for the Panel Partner or other community organisation. In many cases support has been provided directly by the local council or voluntary and community sector organisations. To a large extent this can be seen as a positive – Panels have found willing and able people and organisations to help support them without the need for much central programme involvement.

However, it is worth emphasising that local expertise is in many cases dependent on public sector funding. If the institutional knowledge in these local "anchors" ceased to exist, that would have a significant effect on programmes like Community First, which build on and help to sustain local assets.

There is evidence that, in many Community First areas, the longstanding networks of people involved in the project will continue to take on responsibilities and involvement in community development beyond the end of the programme. In this respect the programme can, therefore, be seen to have provided a vehicle for these existing networks to function, and to expand their reach to get more and different people involved.

Some Panel members would have welcomed a greater role in monitoring and oversight of funded projects, in part to help them build longer term relationships with community groups and enable them to see the impact of

their funding decisions. The extent to which this responsibility would be welcomed across Panel members is unclear; certainly it is not the case that all Panels would have wanted additional responsibility.

A further risk is that in some cases the programme may have focused on established ideas of local needs. This risk is increased where there is particularly strong involvement from members of the community with a track record of community development activity. On the other hand, evidence from the evaluation is fairly positive about the process of developing local priorities, and these seem to have addressed local community needs and allowed local groups to achieve their goals.

1.5.5   Additional activity

A relatively small number of new groups have been created through programme activity. Many Panels did not see this as part of their role, and the availability of existing networks and groups meant it was simply not necessary. It is also worth bearing in mind that doing so is a considerable task, requiring significant time, skills, and further central and local support. The Community Organisers programme has been shown to be beneficial to the Community First programme, including encouraging new groups to form and apply for funding.

The evaluation indicates that Community First funding is most effective in leveraging new matched resources when it is used to fund new activities. While generating new activity and resources is an important element of the programme, evidence from Panel members' shows that Community First is perceived as playing an important role in sustaining and building on existing community activity.

Appendix 1 – technical note

The core aspects of the evaluation are online surveys of Panel members and project leads, longitudinal community-based case studies, and analysis of management information and secondary data.

Online surveys

Three waves of online surveys were the main method of primary quantitative data collection for the evaluation. The first came after the second year's funding recommendations (May-June 2013), the second after the third year's recommendations (May-June 2014) and the final survey came during the fourth year's funding recommendations (September-December 2014).

Surveys were with Panel members (primarily Panel leads registered with CDF at the start of the programme, but also additional Panel members contacted via the Panel lead) and project members (lead contact for each funded project as identified to CDF by the Panel) were conducted as follows:

Table 1 – Panel member surveys response figures

	Post-Year Two survey	Post-Year Three survey	Post Year Four survey
Panel leads emailed invitation to take part	593	593	591
Responses overall	446	185	229
Responses from Panel leads	228	113	169
Responses from other Panel members	218	72	60
Number of Panels that responded	267	132	176
Proportion of Panels that responded	45%	22%	30%

Source: Ipsos MORI

Table 2 – Project member surveys response figures

	Post-Year Two survey	Post-Year Three survey	Post Year Four survey
Funded projects emailed invitation to take part	3,878	2,811	2761
Responses overall	2,127	1,044	953
Response rate	55%	37%	35%

Source: Ipsos MORI

Case studies

In total, 11 longitudinal case studies were undertaken with Panels across the country, (including five where there is overlap with the Community Organisers programme). Case study selection criteria ensured a mix of Panels by region, local characteristics (e.g. rural, urban and suburban areas) and Panel experience.

Secondary data

Secondary data generated within the programme was used to understand programme implementation and progress. Additional analysis has also been carried out by the Office for Civil Society at the Cabinet Office.

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