



Greater Manchester
VCFSE Leadership Group
The sector's voice in devolution



Live Well
everyday support in
every neighbourhood

GM=EqAI · Live Well Greater Manchester · 2025–2026

What happened, what we learned, and what communities told us.

A plain English summary for everyone who was part of this - and everyone who applied.

April 2026 · GM=EqAI, hosted by VSNW

Who this is for

This document is for everyone who was part of the Live Well fund - whether you received a grant, applied but weren't funded, came to a co-design session, or supported the process in any way. It's also for anyone in Greater Manchester who wants to understand what community-led funding looks like when it's done differently.

We've written a longer, more detailed version for funders and VCFSE sector partners. This one is for you.

What this was

In 2025, GM=EqAI was given the chance to test a different way of getting funding to communities that mainstream grant-making consistently misses. Communities that don't fit neatly into one borough. Communities defined by shared language, faith, or lived experience rather than a postcode. Communities that often don't apply for grants because the process itself feels like it wasn't made for them.

We designed a micro-grants fund - awards of up to £1,000 each - and a larger collaborative commissioning process for member organisations. The whole thing was built around one question: what would change if the communities most affected by inequality actually led the funding decisions?

30 projects funded	£57623.50 directly to communities	10 GM boroughs reached	140+ applications received
------------------------------	---	----------------------------------	--------------------------------------

Every Greater Manchester borough was reached. The communities we funded include: racially marginalised communities; migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers; disabled and neurodivergent people; LGBTQ+ communities; women and girls; older people; young people including those with SEND; survivors of domestic abuse; carers; Jewish communities; Muslim communities; Sikh communities; and dispersed, language-based communities that no single borough can claim.

What happened - six stories from the cohort

Numbers matter, but they don't tell you what it actually felt like. Here are six stories from the 30 projects we funded.

KRIMMZ Girls Youth Club, Bolton

KRIMMZ received £1,000 to run wellbeing sessions for girls and young women. They started with the groups they knew - but something unexpected happened. Older women in the community, many of them widows, started asking for their own space. So KRIMMZ created one. They ran 15 sessions, reached 150 people, and used a volunteer minibus to collect women who had no other way to get there. The fund's flexibility meant they could say yes to what the community actually needed, rather than sticking rigidly to the original plan.

Social by Design, pan-GM

Social by Design runs breakfast gatherings for Arabic-speaking refugees across Greater Manchester. At their sessions, parents who had previously relied on their children to translate could attend an event and follow it entirely in their own language - some for the first time. In their formal report to us, they asked us to make an argument, with their named permission: funding that requires a fixed postcode structurally excludes communities like theirs, who organise by shared language and lived experience rather than by geography.

Neshomo CIO, pan-GM

Neshomo used their £960 to run a single mental health awareness event for the Jewish community. Out of that one event, 16 new volunteer befrienders were recruited and trained. Each of those volunteers will go on to support people who are isolated, who face a waiting list for mental health services, who don't feel safe accessing mainstream provision. One event. Sixteen people who will support many more for years.

Manchester Titans American Football Club

The Titans applied for their grant on the last day of the window after finding out about it almost by chance. They used it to train 30 volunteers in Mental Health First Aid. Within days of the training completing, one of those newly trained volunteers used what they'd learned to support a player who was struggling. The training isn't a requirement in their sport. They did it because they decided it mattered.

Beyond Mama, Tameside

Rebekah set up Beyond Mama to support mothers through a 12-week nervous system wellbeing programme. She ran her first cohort on just over £500. By word of mouth and a single local newspaper article, she had 29 people on a waiting list before the programme had finished. She made voice notes and workbooks for mums who couldn't attend because of childcare. The WhatsApp group the cohort set up is still active.

KYP - Kashmir Youth Project, Rochdale

KYP's Chai and Chat sessions brought women together over six weeks. What emerged from those sessions was something they hadn't planned: the women wanted to meet Greater Manchester Police, local mosque leaders, and their MP. They wanted to speak directly about racism and community safety. That meeting happened. It happened because a safe space, built slowly over shared tea and conversation, made it possible.

What we learned

We asked every funded project to tell us what worked and what they'd want to change. We read every response. Here is what the evidence shows.

The application mattered - and it had a floor

The most consistent thing people told us is that the application was proportionate. It matched the size of the grant. It didn't require years of track record or a professional bid writer. That made it possible for organisations that had never applied for funding before to apply - and to get funded.

But we also know the process felt harder for the most capacity-limited organisations: newly formed groups, refugee-led organisations, groups where English is not the first language. Proportionality has a floor. For future rounds, we'd want to lower that floor further.

"The application was proportionate to the amount on offer. We felt the fund genuinely understood the kind of community-led work we do, which is not always the case with statutory funders."

- Social by Design CIC

Flexibility was the point, not a concession

Multiple projects had to change their plans. Venues fell through. Demand from different communities than expected. Partnerships that didn't activate. In every case, we said yes to the change. And organisations that were trusted to adapt delivered more, not less.

"The flexibility of the funding to allow people to do what they know needs to be done has been amazing."

- KRIMMZ Girls Youth Club

Transport and childcare are not extras - they are the programme

Several organisations told us that the thing that made their project work - the thing that got people through the door - was being able to pay for transport or childcare. These are not nice-to-haves. For dispersed, isolated communities, they are the difference between participation and exclusion. Future funding should name them as eligible costs from the start.

"Provide sustained funding for transport and childcare to support ongoing, innovative programming."

- Action 2 Inspire Oldham

Check-ins felt like support, not surveillance

Where we had mid-point conversations with projects, organisations told us those conversations felt helpful rather than intrusive. They were a chance to think out loud, recalibrate, and feel that someone invested in the work cared about how it was going. That relationship produced better end-of-project evidence - which is itself evidence that trust-based monitoring works.

One-off funding starts the relationship, but it can't sustain it

This is the hardest thing to name, because it's a critique of our own constraints. Seventeen organisations told us they didn't need more money - they needed time. For communities where trust takes months to build, a single funded period is often the relationship-building phase, not the impact phase. What came after is where the impact would have happened.

"The most important priority is time - meaningful engagement with marginalised communities cannot be rushed and requires sustained investment."

- EDUK

The evaluation framing changed what people shared

We told funded projects that their end-of-project report would be turned into a poster displayed at our Equity By Design conference. That reframing - from compliance to celebration - changed the quality of what people wrote. When reporting feels like it's for something, not just required, the honesty is different.

What the demand data tells us

We received more than 140 applications for 22 micro-grant awards. That ratio is not a story about a competitive fund. It is a story about unmet need.

The organisations that applied and were not funded were not weak applications. They were organisations doing real work - badminton sessions for Hong Kong BN(O) migrants in Rochdale and Stockport. Men's peer support for Black African men and boys. Dementia carers' wellbeing in South Asian communities. Communities of women who have experienced the criminal justice system. Walking groups for Haredi Jewish women. Cooking sessions for communities rebuilding after displacement.

A fund that received 140 applications from communities like these - in the first round, without sustained outreach - is a fund that was pitching to the right audience. It is also a fund that could only reach a fraction of the people who needed it.

For every organisation that was funded, more than five applied and weren't. That is not a problem with the application process. It is an argument for a bigger and more sustained fund.

One application we couldn't fund - and what it tells us

One organisation applied with a strong, clear project. They were part-way through converting to a Community Interest Company - the legal structure that would have let them hold the grant. Their bank account wasn't yet set up in time. We couldn't fund them.

This is not a story about an organisation doing something wrong. It is a story about how organisational infrastructure requirements - even well-intentioned ones - can exclude the very communities a fund is trying to reach. Social by Design found a solution: they made an agreement with TERN, another organisation, to receive the funds on their behalf. Not every organisation knows that's possible. Future rounds should make this option visible and accessible from the start.

What we are asking funders and decision-makers to consider

This section is for anyone with a hand in how funding flows in Greater Manchester - whether that's GMCA, NHS GM, the National Lottery Community Fund, Local Infrastructure Organisations, or commissioners across the system.

1. Communities that don't organise by postcode need their own funding pathway

The 140+ applications we received prove there is demand. The 30 projects we funded prove the model works. Geographically dispersed communities - those defined by language, faith, shared experience, or intersecting identity - cannot be consistently reached through locality-first funding. They need a dedicated,

resourced, city-region-wide strand. The Spaces of Hope and Connection programme has begun to build this. It needs to hold.

2. Paid participation should be standard, not innovative

We paid organisations for their time in the collaborative commissioning process. We paid people for contributing their knowledge to the design of the fund. This is not exceptional. It is the minimum required to avoid extracting community expertise without compensation. Future programmes should include a payment rate and a budget line for co-production that cannot be negotiated away.

3. Trusted intermediary models need to be explicitly resourced

Some of the most effective community work in this cohort happened through organisations that acted as a bridge: holding the grant and the accountability, while enabling informal community groups to do the community work. This model isn't currently designed for in most commissioning frameworks. It should be.

4. Continuity funding matters more than we were able to provide

Beyond Mama's 29-person waiting list. Neshomo's befriender pipeline. The Gurdwara that continued after the grant ended, funded by community donations. These are not programme successes. They are evidence of need that a single funded period cannot address. The communities that need the most sustained investment are the same ones for whom one-off funding is the relationship-building phase.

What we need to name honestly

A learning document that only names what went well is not a learning document. Here is what we need to say plainly.

We committed to giving feedback and we didn't deliver it

When organisations applied and weren't funded, we offered to give feedback to those who asked for it. We did not follow through on this commitment. The reason is straightforward: capacity. The programme was coordinated by one person across three concurrent workstreams, and the feedback commitment dropped to the bottom of an impossible list. That does not make it acceptable.

If you applied and requested feedback and never received it - we are sorry. You deserved it. Future rounds must build this into the process design as a funded, resourced commitment, not an aspiration.

The data we have is incomplete

Some organisations submitted their end-of-project reports late or not at all. One audio submission could not be read. Some projects had data gaps in their monitoring. We have named these gaps in our detailed report to funders. They don't undermine the overall picture, but they mean the evidence we have is partial, and we should be honest about that.

We didn't reach everyone we set out to reach

Several organisations told us about communities they intended to reach but couldn't within the delivery timeline. Some of the most isolated LGBTQ+ young people were not reached. A men's wellbeing need in parts of Rochdale was identified but unaddressed. These are not failures of intent. They are structural consequences of short timelines and one-off funding. They are the argument for what comes next.

Year 2 of the Inclusion and Wellbeing Fund is now confirmed. That is good news, and it is partly because of what the 30 funded organisations showed was possible. The evidence this cohort built - together - made the case for continuing.

What the conference told us

The feedback on the fund itself was overwhelmingly positive. The application was described as straightforward, proportionate, and unlike most funding processes people had encountered. The opportunity to connect with other organisations and to influence future funding was valued. The main asks were simple: wider promotion so more communities know the fund exists, and better upfront guidance so people can describe their work in a way the fund can recognise.

We also heard a direct question from people working in the wider sector: can small grants really change the system? Our honest answer is that small grants alone cannot - but they are not designed to work alone. The 30 projects funded in the Pilot programme (Year 1) are part of a much larger programme: Live Well Community Fund. The grant is the entry point. What comes after is what starts real changes in the system. Year 2 will be clearer about what that door leads to - in everything we publish, from the application guidance to the programme documentation.

One specific thing we learned: the applications that were most successful were the ones that could describe clearly how their project connects or bridges different communities, identities, and places - not just serves one group. For Year 2, we will include clearer guidance on how to describe this kind of bridge-building work, so that more organisations can show us what they are already doing in a language the fund can recognise.

For Year 2, we will produce a publicly available guidance document before the application window opens - hints and tips for applicants, grounded in what made applications successful in Year 1. This addresses the feedback gap that volume made impossible to resolve through individual responses.

This section draws on feedback gathered at an Evaluation Station at the Equity By Design conference, 23 April 2026 - a space where applicants, grantees, and sector partners could share their experience of the fund. It is community and sector voice, gathered at a single moment, and it sits alongside the 30 grantee reports that form the main evidence base of this document.

What comes next

Year 2 of the Live Well Community Fund has been confirmed and GM=EqAI will again be focused on the enablement of projects supporting Geographically Dispersed Communities building on the learning so far and upcoming targeted engagement opportunities. GM=EqAI has also been named as the pan-GM Equity Partner in the Live Well: Spaces of Hope and Connection programme - a £16.5 million, four-year programme funded by the National Lottery Community Fund. This means we can take everything we learned in this pilot and apply it at a larger – yet targeted - scale.

We are in a co-design phase right now. That means the shape of the equity strand - what it funds, who it reaches, how it makes decisions - is still being formed. If you have a view on what a fund like this should look like, we want to hear from you.

You can contact us at gmeqal@vsnw.org.uk. If you came to our conference on 23 April 2026, thank you. Your presence and your voice are part of this.

Thank you.

To every organisation that applied - funded or not. To everyone who contributed to the co-design sessions. To the volunteers who gave their time. To the community members who showed up, spoke honestly, and trusted us with their stories.

This programme was designed to test whether a different kind of funding was possible. The evidence says yes.

GM=EqAI · Live Well Greater Manchester · April 2026

ayisatu.emore@vsnw.org.uk · gmeqal@vsnw.org.uk

Appendix

What funded organisations told us about the process

This appendix records what the 30 funded organisations said about their experience of applying for and receiving this grant, and what they would change. These are their words, drawn from their end-of-project reports and mid-point conversations. We have not edited or softened them.

The themes are organised into two sections: what worked and should be protected, and what should change for future rounds.

What worked - eight things to protect

These are the features of the programme that organisations named as making a difference. They are not accidental. They reflect deliberate design decisions that could easily be lost in a larger or more institutional version of this fund.

1. The application matched the amount · *Application design*

The most consistent positive across all 30 projects. The application felt appropriate for a small grant - and grantees named this as unusual. Several explicitly contrasted it with their experience of applying to councils or statutory funders. The same process that felt straightforward to established organisations still felt relatively harder for the most capacity-limited - refugee-led, newly formed, or women-led organisations with minimal admin. Proportionality has a floor, and that floor sits differently for different organisations.

2. A real person responded · *Relationship*

Multiple organisations named the quality of communication specifically - not as adequate, but as actively good. Having a named contact who could have a real conversation about fit and framing was described as disproportionately valuable. One organisation described applying to a council as 'dealing with a robot - email only, not even a phone call.' This fund felt different.

3. The money arrived quickly and delivery could start · *Operations*

Speed of decision and payment is a meaningful equity factor. Organisations with reserves can wait; organisations without cannot absorb delays. Fast turnaround was experienced not just as efficient but as genuinely enabling - it signalled trust.

4. Flexibility - adapting without being penalised · *Programme design*

Multiple organisations had to change plans significantly during delivery. In every case, the programme accommodated adaptation without penalising it. Several named this flexibility as a defining feature of what made the work possible. Organisations that were trusted to adapt delivered more, not less.

5. Check-ins felt supportive, not surveillance · *Relationship*

Where check-ins took place, organisations described them as a genuinely useful space - to think out loud, to recalibrate, and to feel that someone cared about how the work was going. The quality of end-of-project evidence was partly a function of the quality of the relationships that preceded it.

6. The evaluation was framed as celebration · *Evaluation design*

Telling funded organisations that their end-of-project report would become a conference poster - something to be proud of - changed the quality of what people wrote. Reporting as celebration produced better evidence than reporting as compliance.

7. The fund reached organisations that mainstream funding misses · *Values and outreach*

Several organisations named the fund as different from their usual experience - specifically because it reached models, communities, and organisations that don't fit standard funding criteria. Pan-GM. Refugee-led. Newly established. Peer-led. Informal community groups. The programme reached them through design, not luck.

8. Collaborative commissioning felt meaningfully different · *Governance*

Despite real tensions in the process, organisations in the collaborative commissioning strand described it as a genuine partnership. The recurring phrase was some version of 'it felt co-owned rather than delivered to us.' That distinction - between owning something and receiving it - mattered deeply.

What should change - nine things to improve

These are the things grantees said they would change. They are recorded here as they described them - not assessed or ranked. They represent the programme's own honest evaluation of itself.

1. Tell us what evidence to collect before we start · *Evaluation design*

Several organisations said they didn't know what evidence would be most useful until the end-of-project report arrived - by which point the evidence either existed or it didn't. Future rounds should provide clear, simple guidance on evidence collection from day one, not at the end.

2. Connect funded organisations to each other · *Programme design*

The most consistent improvement request across the whole cohort. Almost every organisation that mentioned this described it as unmet need. They wanted to know what others were doing. They wanted to share what they'd learned. Connecting funded organisations is low-cost and high-value.

3. Make the monitoring and reporting simpler · *Evaluation design*

Multiple organisations commented on the evaluation form - primarily on repetition between questions and on standard metrics not fitting their delivery model. The organisations most burdened by reporting were the same informal community groups that the fund was specifically designed to reach.

4. Allow more time from application to decision · *Operations*

Several organisations started delivery before formal approval because they anticipated delays. One received less than the amount they had planned around and met the shortfall from their own resources without flagging it. The timeline affected planning and absorbed capacity.

5. Fund things for longer · *Funding model*

Several organisations distinguished between asking for more money and asking for different money - funding that recognised that trust-building takes time, and that a single funded period is often the relationship phase rather than the impact phase.

6. Help organisations find partners and networks · *Programme design*

For dispersed communities with no geographic hub, finding the right partner organisations is the hardest part of the work. GM=EqAI is uniquely placed to help with this, given its network across Greater Manchester. Several organisations named the absence of this support as the thing that limited their reach.

7. Pay costs upfront, not in arrears · *Funding model*

Small community organisations and their participants often cannot absorb costs upfront and be reimbursed later. Payment models that front-load costs - venue hire, participant travel, materials - remove a structural access barrier that reimbursement models create.

8. Improve the collaborative commissioning process design · *Programme design*

Three specific problems were named by organisations in the collaborative commissioning strand: the expression of interest process established ownership expectations before genuine collaboration could form; organisations that had applied were involved in deciding how funding was allocated, creating a conflict of interest; and the time between convening and delivery was too short for the trust-building that real collective working requires. These are design problems, not relational ones. They are addressable.

9. Resource the trusted intermediary model explicitly · *Governance*

The most significant governance insight from the collaborative strand: some communities can only be reached through trusted organisations that hold the grant and the accountability, while informal community groups do the community work. This model should be explicitly designed for in future rounds - not assumed or improvised.

GM=EqAI · Live Well Grantee Learning Log · April 2026 · Pre-synthesis working record

These themes are drawn from end-of-project reports, mid-point conversations, and written check-in notes across all 30 funded projects. Quotes are attributed to organisations, not individuals.