Progress update reflections

March 2022

Progress reporting

The Ideas Fund is piloting a new way of funding, to support researchers and communities to work together.

We have funded projects focused on mental wellbeing in four areas in the UK. Our first grants were made in late 2021, and these projects sent in their first progress reports in February 2022. We asked researchers and community groups to report back to us separately, so we could ask slightly different things.

We asked them about things like:
- How the partnership is going
- How the project is going, and any changes they had made
- Why researchers wanted to get involved in these projects
- How the partnership might change or influence their wider work

This slide deck shares some of the key themes and reflections which emerged from those reports.
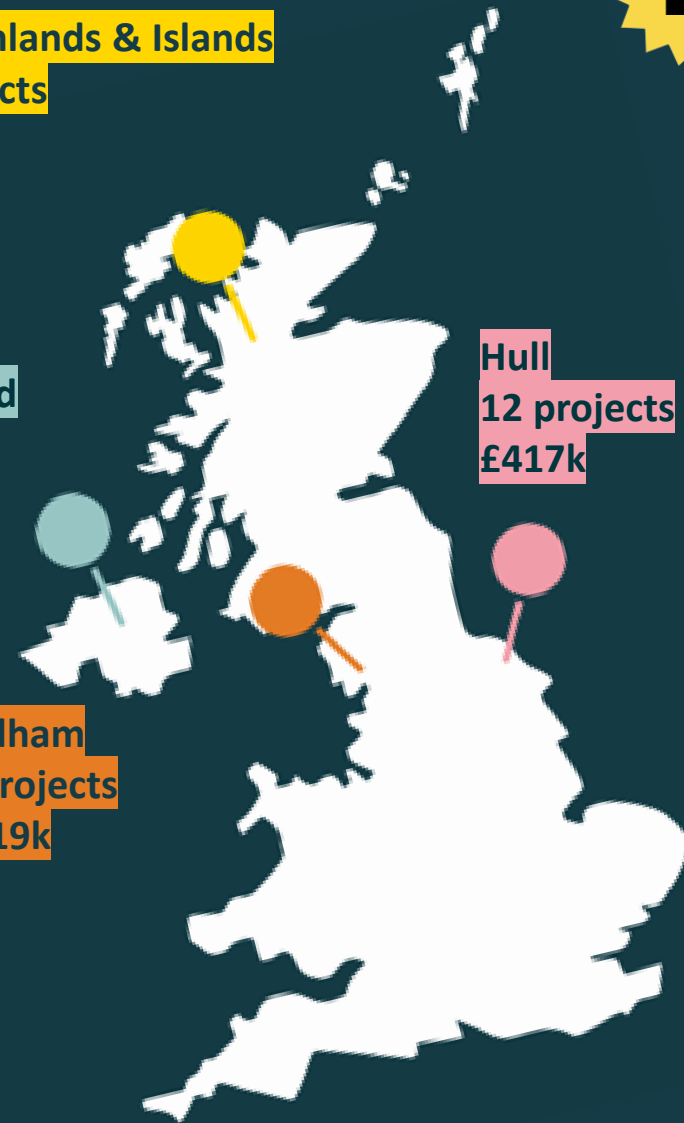
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The Highlands & Islands
13 projects
£505k

42 projects were funded in late 2021 across four areas in the UK.

North-West Northern Ireland
8 projects
£343k

Hull
12 projects
£417k

Oldham
9 projects
£319k

Key findings

Theme	Key reflections
Project Logistics	• Project delays • Impact of Covid 19 • Taking time to plan • Need for greater clarity on roles from the outset • Ethics and organisational barriers • Capacity challenges • Geographical distance
The Partnership	• A new perspective, new relationships • Mutual respect and admiration • Experiences of equity • Communication hurdles • Researcher motivation
The Fund	• Reflections on The Ideas Fund

Project Logistics

Project Delays
Quite a few projects had delays getting started for a range of reasons including recruitment, organizational and staffing changes.

Impact of Covid-19
A significant number of projects described the impact of Covid 19 on their delivery. This cancelled or rescheduled sessions due to staff sickness or volunteer isolation, moving activity online and implementing social distancing measures.

A small number of projects described that their participant group is still uncomfortable with face to face activity despite the rules around this relaxing.

Project Logistics

Ethics and Organisational Barriers

Ethics has been a major topic of conversation for several of our projects during the first months of their work, and this is reflected in the progress reports. In some cases, the nature and complexity of the ethics process has been prohibitive to getting started with the direct work with participants.

This has been a source of frustration for researchers and community organisations alike, particularly where ethics committees have been perceived to be disconnected from the context in which the organisation works.

We have seen some interesting innovation around the ethics process. Some groups established internal steering groups to ensure appropriate scrutiny and safety, and others updating processes with the new insight from researchers. Groups have also found challenges with navigating contracting arrangements with Universities.

Project Logistics

Taking time to plan Several projects described the value of taking time to develop their relationships and plans at the start of the project, rather than jumping straight into delivery. In some cases this also included developing ideas and plans with peer researchers or participants as essential partners to the process.

A small number of projects reflected that they wished they had spent a bit more time on developing their relationship and understanding different approaches and working styles, or spending more time planning before starting to deliver the project.

Need for greater clarity on roles from the outset
Several researchers, and some community partners noted the importance of being clear on the roles and expectations from the start, to avoid confusion.

"we have invested time to ensure that we are confident and comfortable with each other so that we can co-work effectively" - Researcher

Project Logistics

Capacity challenges

Several projects described challenges in keeping their activity on the project within the hours originally planned. Some of this was related to how passionate and excited partners were, and in other cases was a result of navigating bureaucracy or processes which were more time consuming than envisaged.

Geographical Distance

Particularly evident from the reporting from the Highlands and Islands, was the challenges due to geographical context. Many of the researchers don't live close enough to community partners to be there regularly, and during winter months the weather can play a significant role as a barrier to travel. This also adds more time pressure.

The Partnership

We asked researchers and community groups how their partnership was going, including any challenges.

A new perspective, new relationships

Community organisations and researchers alike reflected on the new perspective which their partnership brought to their worlds and their work.

For some researchers, this felt like a completely new way of working – which for some felt liberating and exciting. One researcher described being 'taken out of my comfort zone'. Another reflected on the new relationships with the public sector that involvement in the project with their community partner allowed.

Some of the partnerships are already exploring new opportunities to work together.

"We find ourselves 'thinking' more in research terms" – community group

"The non-hierarchical character of our collaboration is very refreshing" - Researcher

"I also appreciate the unique opportunity to be in a learner's position at the same time as being an 'expert' and the insights that come from merging the two naturally." - Researcher

The Partnership

Mutual respect and admiration

In a large number of the monitoring reports, there is a real sense of mutual respect and admiration between the researcher and community partners, including an appreciation of their expertise, skills, and the new knowledge there are able to bring to the work.

This is particularly clear where the partners have worked together before, and have been able to develop strong and deep relationships. In these descriptions it is often values and a shared sense of purpose which comes to the fore.

"There are no words to describe our regard and respect for [researcher], a highly valuable and hard-working member of our team." – community group

"I felt immediately inspired by what they do…" - researcher

The Partnership

Experiences of equity

Both researchers and community groups commented on the nature of their relationship, and the difference from previous experiences.
Some community groups have reflected on how encouraged they have felt by their researcher to take decisions informed by what they know of their community. Researchers have also reflected on the experience of being in a different role focused on listening and learning rather than having answers.

Communication hurdles

Across both partners there were examples noted of challenges in communication due to finding the right tools to communicate or working through differing approaches or styles of communicating during collaboration. There were examples of being new to platforms, and even the different pace and language used in the academic and community worlds.

"...this way of working has enabled all participants to feel like they are starting out on the journey together..." – community group

The Partnership

Researcher motivation

We asked researchers what made them get involved in the projects we've funded.

Some researchers described their motivations for participation in the project in terms of social responsibility – either that it was the right thing to do, or that they wanted to affect some positive change in the world through the work they would contribute to.

Some researchers also talked about the potential for the identification of new research themes, expanding their research experience to a new group or the ability to form future research-focused relationships.

Researchers also talked about their joy at supporting PhD students to develop their skills working alongside communities, and the expectation that they would themselves develop new skills. They also talked about the potential for bringing real world examples back into the classroom to use with their students.

The Fund

Several organisations described the value of flexibility from The Ideas Fund central team and Development Coordinators, and a sense that the way these grants were being supported and monitored felt different from previous experiences with funders.

Some also highlighted that this provides challenges in terms of getting the balance right on being prescriptive/flexible.

Researchers have shown an excitement at being able to work in a different way, and even return to some of their initial motivations for starting out in the research world.

"My main motivation for coming into academia was conducting research to help charities and community groups. But, since Covid began I felt removed from working with communities and conducting research."

"I particularly liked the approach of this to redress the power dynamic of the community deciding what they wanted"

"I feel that the project has taken us a step further than previous public engagement projects I took part in – it has challenged us, including peer co-researchers, to not only gather different thoughts and perspectives, but to truly participate in all stages"

Next steps

We have worked with Development Coordinators in each of our four regions to find ways to reflect on this learning, and have used it to inform our next round of funding.

Get in touch

The Ideas Fund is delivered by the British Science Association (BSA) and funded by Wellcome.

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