

How the Ambition for Ageing programme in Greater Manchester used social relations to create change in neighbourhoods.



Introduction

This briefing provides a summary of a [report](#) which examines the Ambition for Ageing (AfA) programme's work in Greater Manchester through the lens of social capital.

Social capital is the value or benefit derived from being a part of social networks, or other social structures. The report illustrates how Ambition for Ageing leveraged these benefits by drawing on existing social capital in the form of programme staff's own connections. Some of this already existed in the local communities where the programme worked but staff also worked to build new social capital to support more diverse relationships in neighbourhoods.

Social capital mirrors inequalities, making it difficult to use it as a way of addressing these inequalities. Because of this, Ambition for Ageing as a programme intent on addressing inequalities in neighbourhoods, had to allow local delivery staff sufficient time and freedom to not only utilise existing relationships but also to develop and invest in new ones – often by working creatively in neighbourhoods that did not have much social capital.

Methodology

The data that this briefing and report is based on was collected through a series of interviews with local delivery lead staff in the eight Greater Manchester localities covered by the Ambition for Ageing programme: Bolton, Bury, Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale, Salford, Tameside and Wigan.

The resulting data was used for studying the social capital relations that underpinned Ambition for Ageing's success.

The interviews were conducted in Spring 2019 and covered 4 projects per area, a total of 32.

This briefing provides a summary of the report, *A social capital perspective on community development: How the Ambition for Ageing programme in Greater Manchester used social relations to create change in neighbourhoods*.

[Visit our website](#) to read it in full.

GMCVO works to drive economic and social inclusion in Greater Manchester through effective collaborations and supporting other organisations to achieve their goals.

We support better decision making by increasing the accessibility and diversity of learning and insight.

Findings

Spectrum of Ambition for Ageing support

A significant proportion of projects in this study received a form of support that exceeded the mere provision of funding, illustrating the emphasis AfA placed on providing support. Because it was very responsive to the needs of grantees and specific local contexts, AfA involvement in the projects in this study covered a spectrum ranging from commissioning projects without additional support to exclusive management and implementation of projects to ensure that they were taken forward at all.

Between these two poles, AfA delivery staff gave intensive hands-on support to fundees, helped with brokering relationships or by acting as a neutral third party, as

well as delivering projects in partnership. Because of this support offer, AfA was able to develop projects even in areas where there seemed to be a scant basis for activity due to an absence of social capital and social infrastructure (spaces where people can have social interactions and build connections). It also enabled the programme to facilitate the participation of people from diverse backgrounds. In addition, the fact that local delivery staff were working with a multitude of actors in a given community enabled them to identify, capitalise on and identify synergies between opportunities.

This often resulted in bringing together people across differences and provided access to new resources and information to those involved.



Accumulation of social capital over time

Although AfA injected financial capital into communities, the social capital relations the programme built and activated were more significant. By creating a local infrastructure of staff in each of the boroughs where the programme worked, AfA created new social capital in these communities. Not only could AfA often draw on staff's social relationships from projects that they had previously been involved with, but close interaction with fundees over time also accumulated further social capital.

Providing support was a mechanism for building trust between the programme and local community members, which helped to convince those who might not naturally have engaged with the programme to become involved and build their civic engagement skills over time. AfA also had a governance structure that allowed those who had been funded by the programme to stay involved, furthering the exchange of ideas and learning that could be fed back into the programme.

Because of the microfunding approach, AfA handed out small amounts of money to a large number of local projects over time, leading to a multitude of actors in a given locality having a connection to the programme and its governance structure.



Context-dependent nature of social capital

A number of factors influenced how projects started and evolved, including the presence of key individuals who had a commitment to engage; the presence of physical assets; the history of community engagement in a given area; the demographic make-up of areas; and the nature of the local ‘market’.

Because projects were the result of a mix of these ingredients, they were specific to a certain place and time. Caution is in order when it comes to attempting to transfer successful projects to a different context. Rather than focusing on types of projects, it would be more sensible to focus on the particular approach to idea generation and an understanding of which key ingredients are already in place and which ones first need to be nurtured.

Limitations of asset-based approaches

Ambition for Ageing followed an asset-based approach, building on the foundation of what existed in local areas. Assets in this context could signify relationships but also physical assets in the form of social infrastructure. AfA’s experience shows that because both types of assets are fraught with cultural and social baggage and may express the very inequalities that a project like AfA set out to address, they have to be approached with awareness.

As an example, the [full report](#) highlights the opportunities and risks associated with relying on local gatekeepers and shows how AfA tried to ameliorate the resulting initial networks by rigorously addressing gaps in engagement through deliberate outreach to those who might not be in a gatekeeper’s purview. Subsequently, it outlines the risks and opportunities of using social infrastructure for engaging with participants and shows how different types of spaces can affect engagement in different ways.

Conclusion

When using ways of working that rely on and seek to maximise the benefit of social relations it is important to remember that social capital is not necessarily a 'cheaper' or more attainable form of capital than other forms of capital.

Particularly in the context of a programme intended to address inequalities, this required an investment of time, money and staff capacity to ensure that the social capital inequalities arising from other inequalities were not amplified but ameliorated.

AfA's successful use of relationships and

other assets to address inequalities relied on an investment in the processes that changed the context to become more inclusive, invested in social capital that was still underdeveloped and built new social capital from scratch, alongside that which was readily available.

Although the projects themselves may not be transferable to other areas, because of the way in which they arose from very specific local contexts, the principles of co-production, microfunding and provision of support alongside funding that underpin them can be.



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