

'It's a small pot of money
but it is amazing what you
can do with a small pot of
money' – SODIT

We are all connected.
We are huge warm feeling hearts sending out
our pain and joys to each other.
We are dream seekers, breaking into the
unknown together.
We are JOY!
We are birds in flight moving through the wind.'
– excerpt from poem by
Community Action to Inspire Hope

'It has been like a deep breath
for the community... life currently
is full of really shallow breaths'
– Men Up North



NSUN COVID-19 Fund Evaluation

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Introduction

During 2020, NSUN awarded grants of over £125,000 to 88 organisations and groups, to support peer support, community action and mutual aid for mental health during Covid-19. The NSUN Covid-19 Fund consisted of an initial grant of £100,000 from Mind's Coronavirus Mental Health Relief Fund (CMHRF) via the Department of Health and Social Care, to distribute £60,000 in small grants. NSUN was then awarded a second grant of £50,000, in July, to distribute 10 grants of £5,000 to existing NSUN grantees which were organisations or groups led by and for people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Communities. NSUN then received an additional grant of £10,000 from Lankelly Chase, and the CMHRF then awarded NSUN £5,000 to distribute to an existing grantee delivering helpline support. In total, NSUN distributed £125,276.56. The grant management including the evaluation totalled £40,000.

The smaller fund managed by NSUN was given to support small community led and user-led groups and organisations who might not otherwise be eligible for one of the larger grants awarded under the Coronavirus Mental Health Response Fund administered by the Mental Health Consortia. The NSUN Covid-19 Fund awarded grants of up to £2000 to support community action, peer support, mutual aid and other activities that made a direct difference to the lives of people living with mental ill-health, trauma and distress during this Covid-19 period.

The evaluation covers the following:

1. The grants: statistics about grant applications and grants given
2. Evaluation forms received (35): what do they tell us about the impact of the fund and experiences of the grant-giving process?
3. Case studies (12): a more in-depth look at 12 groups and the impact of both Covid-19 and the Fund.
4. Short films (10): ten three-minute films edited by Flexible Films showcasing the ways some groups used NSUN COVID-19 funding to adapt their activities through the pandemic and talking through thoughts of the future for user-led groups.
5. Reflections on the process: Interviews with staff, trustees: reflections on the process and impact of the Fund, including the impact on NSUN.
6. Concluding reflections

1. The grants awarded

NSUN received 381 applications in total, and initially awarded £60,262.06 to 78 organisations, groups and collectives. Two organisations were awarded additional small uplift grants, making a total of 80 grants awarded. With the additional £50,000 NSUN provided 10 additional grants of approximately £5,000 each to existing grantees which were organisations led by and for people from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic communities. The total awarded was £49,975.

Thanks to an additional grant from Lankelly Chase, NSUN awarded an additional £10,000 in grants of approximately £1,000 each to ten more organisations, groups and collectives. The total awarded through the Lankelly Chase uplift was £10,039.50. In February 2021, NSUN awarded one existing grantee £5,000 to deliver helpline support, thanks to an additional grant from the CMHRF.

Of the original 78 organisations funded, 23 (30%) were BAME groups representing 35% of the funding awarded. Including the additional funding however, the proportion of funding awarded to BAME groups was 63%.

15 (17%) of the 88 organisations were gender specific: 14 for women and one for men. Four (4.5%) were LGBTQ+ organisations or groups.

Most of the applications (c. 75%) were for some form of technology to enable online or remote connection with their communities, whether for software (typically Zoom subscriptions) or hardware (laptops, mobile phones or tablets). Two-thirds of these (30% of the grants overall) were asking for additional items along with technology; examples of this include: training, creative or wellbeing packs to send out to members, facilitator costs for online groups and printing and postage. The remaining 25% of applications included staffing and volunteer costs, creative and postal projects, translations.

In total, NSUN awarded 90 grants to 88 organisations. A full list of the organisations is given below (Table 1).

Grantee	Original CMHRF grant	Lankelly grant	CMHRF Uplift grant	Helpline grant	Case Study	Video
361 Lifesupport	£578.78				Y	
3 Starts	£980					
Adira	£1200		£5000			Y
African Caribbean Forum Kent	£990		£5000		Y	
Arts and Health Hub		£840				
Badass People Demystified		£1000				
Boooooom CIC		£1000				
Bristol Disability Equality Forum	£1000					
Bristol Reclaiming Independent Living	£787					
Breakdown Bolton	£937.89					
Bury Veterans Hub Cafe	£850					
By Your Side	£1020					
Chesterfield Bipolar Group	£144					
Chime to Thrive		£1000			Y	
Chronically Awesome	£196					
CiLK (Centre for Independent Living (Kent))	£1000				Y	
Community Action to Inspire Hope	£200 £200				Y	
Community Enterprise East London	£200					
Community Network Group CIC	£180					
Compassionate Mental Health		£1000				
Depression Xpression	£674.00					
EleMental Music	£580					
Empower the Invisible Project CIC	£750					
FACE	£900					
Ffena	£1000		£5000		Y	Y
For Women	£120					
Free2B-Me LGBTQ+ Community Organisation	£911.88					
Freya	£849					
FruitCake Creatives	£1000				Y	
Hearts and Minds	£1000					
Hive South Yorkshire	£850					
Humanity Concern Projects	£1000					
Humber All Nations Alliance	£1050					
Independent and Work Ready		£999.50				
Kashmiri Arts & Heritage Foundation	£1800					
Kunsaka	£949.98		£5000			
KwaAfrica	£1000					
Let's Talk About Loss	£895.92					Y
Mad Covid	£794.04					
Make it Happen	£479					
Make Space	£407				Y	
MCRC Ltd	£980.16					Y
Melancholy and Raving	£225.99					
Men Up North	£471.68		£5000		Y	
Meridian Women's Association		£1000				
Migrant Empowerment Group	£700		£5000		Y	
Mom's Mindful Hub	£1000					

MSKT/BACA Whiteness and Race Equality network	£935					
National Hearing Voices Network	£2000					
New Baby Network CIC	£946					
Nomad Radio	£800					Y
North East together	£1000					
North Tyneside Disability Forum Ltd	£600					
On the Out	£1000					
Organisation of Support and Advice for Religion and Culture (OSARC)	£1000		£5000			
People Come First	£300					
People First	£298.88					
Pioneer LXP	£690.08					
PND Mummies CIC	£498.90					
Real Insight Consultancy UK CIC	£1970					
Release into Victory	£200					
Rise and Shine	£887					
Rising Moments community project group	£800					
Safely Held Talking Learning Healing	£193.88					
SARELI (SALFORD REFUGEES LINK)	£1272		£5000			
Self-Injury Self Help	£800				Y	
Self-Injury Support		£1200		£5000		
Shaftesbury Mental Health Peer Support Group	£210					
Shining stars community group	£1000					
SM Talking Circles	£935					Y
Surrey Coalition of Disabled people		£1000				
Survivors of depression in transition	£1000				Y	
Survivors' Poetry	£473.71					
SWAN (Supporting Women, Activities Network)	£1000					
Taking Control of Psychiatric Medication Group	£443.88					
Talk for Health Chair and Share group	£143.88					
Talking Sense	£119.90					Y
Taraki	£299.76		4975			Y
The Clear Out Your Closet Collective	£1000					
The Cultural Connection	£1249					
The Octopus Foundation	£550					
The Sunshine Group	£193.87 £120					
Traveller Pride	£500		5000			Y
Waltham Forest Hearing Voices Group	£1000					
#watchUsgrow	£993					
We love carers		£1000				
West London Somaliland Community	£986					
Wish (Women in Secure Hospitals)	£1000					Y
Total	£60,262.06	£10,039.50	£49,975	£5000	12	10

Table 2: Original CMHRF fund: applications recieved, awarded and paid

Total no. applications received	371
Applications rejected	291
Applications approved	80
Average grant awarded	£753.28
Amount paid and allocated	£60,262.06

It is notable that a total of nine organisations applied for less than £200, and 26 groups did not have a dedicated bank account.

Grant-making process

NSUN aimed to make the process as accessible as possible, using a light-touch form and offering support from a grants manager. They also supplied an Easy Read version of the form, an opportunity taken up by three organisations.

Grant applicants were contacted by a grants manager in the first instance, who was also available to support people with their applications. The grants manager did an initial sift according to the criteria, arranged a phone call/Zoom with the shortlisted applicant, and approved applications under £200 which met the criteria. The contact with the grantees was an invaluable part of the process. These applications and her notes were then put forward to a panel which met each week (two standing members: NSUN CEO Akiko Hart and NSUN Associate, Mark Brown; one NSUN trustee and Alison Faulkner, the evaluator). Successful applicants were then sent a grant agreement form based on similar forms from Awards for All and Lankelly Chase.

We were able to fund applicants without bank accounts through the [Equals Money Scheme](#) which sends out expenses cards (like debit cards) which people could use for purchases, and which also tracked purchases. Throughout the process, the grants team worked closely with our Finance Officer to set up strict financial controls, including receipts for all purchases, and requests for copies of organisational bank details.

Some applications were rejected on the basis that the group was not user-led, some for being outside the grant remit (e.g. not Covid related) and some because they were

Table 3: Organisations funded by region

East of England	3
East Midlands	2
London	14
North East	8
North West	7
South East	7
South West	6
West Midlands	10
Yorkshire and Humber	7
England wide	14
UK wide	10
Total	88

applying for food which was not within the remit of the fund. A few individuals were applying for money to pay themselves, which we also could not fund. In the early days of the fund, a number of applications came from mutual aid groups where the link with the ethos of NSUN and the fund was not clear. These experiences led to the team discussing further what they/we felt to be the 'spirit of the fund' (see page 16).

Additional fund for BAME grantees

When the extra £50,000 was received, NSUN contacted all of the existing BAME grantees to invite them to apply for an extra £5,000. An extra panel was set up with Akiko, Baljeet Sandhu (the CEO of the Centre for Knowledge Equity, and co-founder of the Lived Experience Leaders Movement (LEx Movement) and Zoe Bennett (NSUN Trustee and Managing Director of Training Personified) to assess and distribute the ten grants. In this round, priority was given to applications that came from BAME groups and organisations, rather than organisations led by white people managing BAME projects. This additional process invited strong applications; it was a very positive experience and enabled NSUN to build relationships of trust with the organisations involved. These ten organisations and their projects are given below:

- **Adira:** work in partnership with a local hair salon to provide free hairstyles for Black communities, teaching people to do their own hair online and teaching two young people to learn new skills in hair care; through this to develop community peer support and wellbeing. (link to video)
- **African Caribbean Forum, Kent:** CEASE project (Covid Effect & African Support Engagement) providing support to local African communities: befriending, wellbeing sessions, peer support, phone calls - engaging community volunteers to reach out to their peers. See Case Study page X
- **Ffena:** Working with a network of Africans living with HIV; Providing safe clinic spaces for health checks, opportunities to connect via Zoom, laptops for some members to enable their connection with the groups, preparation for returning to the centre and face to face meetings (see evaluation video). See Case Study page 25.
- **Kunsaka:** employ a digital response worker to co-ordinate a team of four volunteers to support African elders across London; to run regular Zoom sessions to reduce isolation, loneliness and anxiety.
- **Men Up North:** develop an outdoor allotment space for the community, grow an edible garden, create outdoor workshops to engage the men, teach cooking skills online and engage in foraging walks. See Case Study page 43.
- **Migrant Empowerment Group:** extending the online sewing project to re-introduce traditional skills to isolated families and individuals: paying for tutor, volunteer expenses, extra sewing machines and materials and a laptop. See Case Study page 46.
- **OSARC (Organisation of Support and Advice for Religion and Culture):** Project co-ordinator for 8 weeks, volunteer expenses to provide online advice, information and advocacy; outreach in the community; interpreting and translating; regular phone calls and visits.

- **Sareli:** reaching out to refugees in Salford to prevent isolation and reconnect with community: 3 outreach befriender volunteers, and a Digital Ambassador to help bring people online and equip people with basic digital skills so that they can take advantage of the information, advice and support available through Sareli.
- **Taraki:** contribute towards the development of a set of online resources aimed at mental health promotion, mental ill-health prevention, and resiliency building within Punjabi LGBTQ+ communities ([see evaluation video](#)).
- **Traveller Pride:** therapy sessions for LGBTQ+ travellers, a trans solidarity fund and publicity to promote their services ([see evaluation video](#)).

Additional funds from the Lankelly Chase Foundation

We received a surge of applications for the final panel and were not able to fund all shortlisted applicants. As a result, we applied to the [Lankelly Chase Foundation](#) for an additional £10,000. On receipt of these funds, we convened another panel to select the final ten organisations to receive grants, and distributed £10,039.50. The grantees are listed below:

- Arts and Health Hub
- Badass People Demystified
- Booom CIC
- Chime to Thrive (see case study page 28)
- Compassionate Mental Health
- Independent and Work Ready
- Meridian Women's Association
- Self-Injury Support
- Surrey Coalition of Disabled people
- We love carers

2. Evaluation forms

Each group or organisation receiving a grant was invited to fill in a brief evaluation form online via Typeform. The questions (see Appendix A) addressed the actual spending achieved, what difference the grant had made to the group and any challenges faced by the group. A total of 35 forms were returned, representing 40% of the total number of grants given.

Groups and projects

The 35 groups that returned evaluation forms were geographically spread as follows: East of England 1, East Midlands 1, London 5, North East 2, North West 3, South East 4, South West 4, West Midlands 4, Yorkshire and Humber 7, national remit 4.

Twelve of the 35 (34%) were groups working for and within a range of different BAME communities. These included: Black young people, Farsi speaking communities, African people living with HIV, Punjabi community, South Asian men, Kashmiri community, and French speaking African Congolese people.

Six were specifically working with women; these included groups supporting adult survivors of domestic violence and child sexual abuse, women living with depression and two groups working with mothers to support maternal mental health. Two groups were working with men only: one with South Asian men and another supporting a men in sheds project.

Two projects were working with LGBTQ+ people from BAME communities, one in Bradford with refugees and asylum seekers, and a Punjabi organisation working to address social isolation of Punjabi LGBTQ+ people.

Several groups originated from within a community of Disabled people or people with long term conditions: either mentioning mental health service users or survivors as a part of their community, or said they were working to address the mental health needs of Disabled people.

Many groups mentioned working to address the wider social and economic issues that their communities were living with. These included: poverty, multiple disadvantage, social deprivation and exclusion, prisoners/ex-prisoners, refugees and asylum seekers. Isolation was a common issue raised by nearly all of the groups in one way or another.

Grants

Of the 35 groups who returned an evaluation form, 29 had applied for some form of technological assistance to enable them to reach their community remotely: most

commonly Zoom subscription along with laptops or mobile phones and data. The second most common application was to fund staff or to cover volunteers' expenses, whether increasing capacity to respond to increased need or facilitators to help manage the online space in different ways. Six of the groups applied for the means to produce postal projects: wellbeing packs or creative materials to send out to their members. Some followed up by using the materials in an online group. Finally, a few groups applied for training funds, most commonly safeguarding training to support their online activities.

Grant-giving process

Nearly all of the groups reported finding the application process straightforward, easy and clear. Several mentioned the helpfulness of NSUN staff contacted via email or phone. It is notable that several groups had either never or rarely applied for grants before, which is significant in relation to the opportunity this fund was able to offer. Rendering these small grants accessible was a key aim in reaching grassroots groups.

'We had only completed one grant application before this one. This process was definitely less painful'.

It was our aim to support people to make applications, in order to ensure we reached small groups who might have big goals in relation to their local communities, but little capacity to apply for the larger grants available. The evaluation forms suggest that we were successful in this. The grant manager took people through the process over the phone and guided people towards the kinds of things we were more likely to fund.

'Found the process easier than expected and felt very comfortable dealing with your organisation as I felt you really understood the group and our aims.'

'Our volunteer fundraiser applied for the grant - she found the application process refreshingly straightforward. She also enjoyed speaking with Emma to explain about our organisation and application.'

Only one respondent reported finding the form constraining.

Impact of the grant

As with all self-completion surveys, the responses varied in length and detail, with some writing very little and some writing a lot. Nearly all of the 35 respondents were grateful for the grant and said that it had made a positive difference to their ability to continue their work, maintain connection with people and support them through this difficult

period. There were a few who simply said that it had helped them to go online, and a couple who had been unable to spend any or all of the money for various reasons. Many talked of the ability to communicate with their members as a result of purchasing the technology. Although for some this was online using Zoom, some were using WhatsApp as well or instead of online options. Nevertheless, in order to do so, they had needed smart phones for their members. Others were using phones, Facebook and postal connections.

Some wrote with passion about the difference the fund had made to their group:

'It meant we are able to deliver the health and wellbeing service once a month during Covid for our most vulnerable LGBTQ+ service users'. - Free to be Me, Bradford

'We have definitely engaged harder to reach people and also successfully got people interested in engaging further. Mental health-wise the feedback suggests that the workshops have been a real lifeline. They have helped us think about how we want to move forward with this kind of work and energised us from knowing how important this work is!' - Hive, South Yorkshire

'It was so exciting to receive this grant and it enabled us to respond quickly and effectively to challenges of lockdown.' - Let's Talk About Loss

'Your grant enabled our organisation to become very active in Tower Hamlets and East London. We have developed very high profile among our service users in the area. The grant provided stability in volunteering to our organisation.' - OSARC, London

'We have been able to continue to support our most vulnerable Shed project members. We have delivered various craft activities to keep minds and hands busy, which is so important, particularly for those with dementia, and our visits have reduced feelings of loneliness and isolation. Feedback from Sheddies and their wives, for those who have them, has been so positive and we truly underestimated the impact such a simple scheme would have. Most importantly, was to know that someone was thinking and caring about them.' - The Octopus Foundation, Kent

3. Short films

Ten short films were made with the help of Flexible Films, to showcase how just a few groups used the fund to adapt to the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic. The films showcase the work of:

- Adira: survivor-led mental health and wellbeing organisation based in Sheffield supporting Black people with mental health issues.
- Ffena: a network of Africans in the UK living with and affected by HIV.
- Let's Talk About Loss: supporting young people experiencing bereavement
- Mashriq Challenge Resource Centre: an organisation in Birmingham that aims to create a safe and welcoming space for disadvantaged South Asian women with mental health issues.
- Nomad Radio: Somali radio station - exploring issues of mental health in the community during the pandemic.
- SM Talking Circles: group for adults with a history of selective mutism that has led to mental distress.
- Talking Sense: Hearing Voices group in London.
- Taraki: mental health awareness and support for Punjabi communities, including LGBTQ+ people.
- Traveller Pride: a collective supporting LGBTQ+ Travellers.
- WISH: user-led charity for women experiencing mental health difficulties in prisons, hospitals and the community.

4. The case studies

Twelve case studies were collected: Zoom or phone calls were recorded and case study reports shared with the project to ensure their accuracy. The questions used are given in Appendix B.

1. **361 Life Support, Virtual:** group set up to support survivors of domestic violence and child sexual abuse.
2. **African Caribbean Forum, Kent:** Supporting African Caribbean community in Kent, supporting community engagement and linking with services.
3. **Centre for Independent Living, Kent:** DPULO supporting the wellbeing, independence and social inclusion of Disabled people in Kent.
4. **Chime to Thrive, Virtual:** a one-to-one trauma-informed model of peer-to-peer support offered to people struggling with their mental health.
5. **Community Action to Inspire Hope, Durham:** group of people supporting each other bonded by 'a difficult mental journey in life that bonds us to stick together and offer help to each other'.
6. **Ffena, London and National:** network of African people living with or affected by HIV.
7. **Fruitcake Creatives, London:** established originally to do the Largactyl Shuffle walks, this is a peer support group meeting up through walks and coffee meet-ups in South London.
8. **Make Space, Virtual:** Set up in response to Covid-19 for people who self-harm - in the knowledge that lockdown, pressure on A&E services and reduced contact with others might make for challenging situations for people who self-harm.
9. **Men Up North, Sheffield:** support for men to change the statistics about male suicide through normalising conversations about mental health and masculinity.
10. **Migrant Empowerment Group, Wolverhampton:** registered charity for the prevention or relief of poverty for refugees and asylum seekers.
11. **Self Injury Self Help, Bristol:** Small community group supporting people who self harm.
12. **SODIT, Sheffield:** Peer support for women experiencing depression and other mental distress.

Each case study speaks for itself (they are available in Appendix C) but we draw out some of the key themes below:

Impact of the grant

At the core of the impact of the pandemic has been the inevitable inability of groups to continue meeting face-to-face. They talked of the impact on their communities: people becoming more isolated, anxious and depressed, fearful of the virus, less able to use their usual strategies and an increase in reports of domestic violence and relationship

breakdown. Groups experienced greater demand for their support, some people needing more one-to-one responses and others having to develop new policies alongside the practical demands of connecting remotely.

It was clear that some groups were more impacted than others, in that some were vulnerable to the virus due to multiple disabilities or health conditions, and others by the implications of the virus. Racialised communities talked of fear due to the impact of the virus within their communities. People with health conditions or disabilities that already limited their mobility were fearful of increased isolation. The groups supporting people who self-harm talked of the pressure of remaining at home without recourse to their usual strategies and possibly within non-supportive relationships. An additional concern was that they did not feel able or comfortable to attend A&E during this time. A couple of the groups were beginning to talk of the challenge of entering a new period with renewed restrictions to come. One group said that, with the expectation that the pandemic was coming to an end not being realised, people are feeling trapped, alone and anxious.

Looking at the 12 case studies, the impact of the need to connect remotely had been variable: from a group whose fundamental existence has been challenged (SISH) to a group whose purpose has been realised more effectively in the virtual space (361 Life Support). Whilst the majority of groups used the grant to move online using Zoom, there were some who adopted variations on keeping in touch remotely. Some were using WhatsApp alongside Zoom and one of the groups (Community Action to Inspire Hope) talked of maintaining contact by post, sending a range of creative and uplifting materials to their members.

Several groups talked of the need to explain the use of the equipment remotely and encourage people to join them on Zoom on a one-to-one basis, all of which required extra time and resources. Others talked of some of their members being unable to make the transition to online connections and so having to find other ways of reaching and connecting people.

A couple of the groups were benefitting from the new online space; 361 Life Support, Migrant Empowerment Group (MEG) and Ffena seemed to grow in the space. MEG developed a sewing project, providing sewing machines to families and providing classes online; they said the group had 'come together as a family' and 'everybody loves the technology'. They were even reaching people in other countries. Similarly, Ffena had embraced WhatsApp with enthusiasm, with the facilitator having to mute her phone sometimes because of all the activity: 'They are so connected, so knitted'.

The pandemic has in a sense revealed the nature and extent of digital exclusion in the communities we work with. Although NSUN was able to help with this through distributing this fund, we have reached a tiny proportion of the groups and people who need access to digital technology. Having said that, as we have heard from several groups, digital technology will not work for everyone.

The NSUN grant

All of the case studies expressed gratitude for the grant: it had helped them to achieve something for their community, to stay connected with people or to do so more safely, and sometimes to develop something new and different from their usual work. One said 'Without you we would never have done this.'; and another: 'Thank you. You have helped our group connect together, put a smile on their face, shown that you can learn even at home'.

One group (Make Space) was set up in response to Covid, so this had different implications to those already established as supporting people face-to-face. At the time of the interview, Make Space had not spent all of its grant and they were still exploring how and what they might offer to people affected by self-harm. One group had not spent the money at the time of the interview; SISH were planning to pay a facilitator to create a space for the group coordinators to reflect on how they wanted to move forward with the group. As mentioned earlier, this group was challenged to the core by the pandemic, as it had relied on retaining a safe and anonymous space for people to attend as and when they wanted. They did not want to ask for, or retain, people's contact details.

A couple of groups were using a combination of different approaches to staying in touch, in response to the different needs of different members of their community. Men Up North is a good example of this, in that they were staying in touch on Zoom with some people and had begun working an allotment and doing foraging walks with some of the older men.

SODIT had used the grant for technology that helped their staff and volunteers to work from home. They had to put in place new or revised policies on safeguarding and use of data. They also created a Covid-specific helpline; the grant had enabled them to keep the helpline secure and safe for staff to run.

Wellbeing

Some of the case study groups were able to discuss the impact of the grant on their group's wellbeing and to offer examples of individuals who had benefitted as a result of the grant. A few talked of the impact for the facilitators of the group: reducing anxiety for staff or volunteers and enabling people to work more safely - 'not having to fire-fight all the time'. African Caribbean Forum in Kent talked of 'the joy of being able to help those in need.'

Men Up North said it had particularly benefitted the older men in their community who were unable or unwilling to use technology: 'it has been like a deep breath for the community and for the men that have participated... life currently is full of really shallow breaths'. Migrant Empowerment Group talked of the immense impact it had had on the wellbeing of their group: 'I can't finish telling you about the positive side of this'. Fruitcake Creatives said it had lifted people's spirits 'having the Christmas walk to look forward to

has been good'. Chime to Thrive said it had provided a safety net for people stranded by services at this time.

What support can NSUN offer to small groups

Whilst all of the case study groups were keen to be able to access further funding in the future, particularly core funding which they found hard to find, some had other suggestions for the kind of support that would be helpful:

- Support for peer/group leaders and facilitators: a reflective space or peer mentoring to promote the sustainability of small groups relying on few people to keep them going;
- Checklist of things to think about when setting up a group;
- Digital exclusion: find ways of sharing the learning or teaching skills to people who are digitally excluded.

Several people were appreciative of the work NSUN already does: distributing these small grants, the newsletter and website resources, the short films shared as part of the COVID fund (see 3 above). A couple of people wanted to see funding restricted to non-constituted or very small groups, the groups referred to in the 2020 [report](#) by 360Giving, NCVO and Local Trust as 'below-the-radar': 'a group of community organisations that often get overlooked, and yet play a crucial role in bringing people together in local communities, frequently providing activities and services that others don't.'

They can't be commissioned into existence, as one of our grant recipients pointed out; they evolve out of, and in response to, a local need: 'making sure that there is support for these really organic spaces is just really helpful.' There is a valuable role for NSUN in supporting and campaigning on behalf of small user-led or community-led groups: 'without any infrastructure or support, they are very difficult to sustain.'

5. Reflections on the experience

We met as a group a couple of times and emailed individually, where meeting was not possible, so that all team members could share their experiences of managing the fund. In addition, Alison interviewed some of the trustees who acted as panel members. The following is a summary of these reflections.

- **The spirit of the fund.** Although the concept of being 'user-led' was felt to epitomise the spirit of the fund, it became clear that we had begun to re-evaluate how we understood this term, extending our thinking beyond the obvious association with use of statutory mental health and social care services.

Increasingly, people who experience distress are not using services in the way that they used to. We encountered many examples of groups responding to the needs of people experiencing distress, disadvantage and discrimination but who did not use and/or would not want to use statutory services. These could emerge out of, for example, refugees and asylum seekers, Black communities seeking to support each other and avoid services, mothers feeling isolated and desperate but avoiding services for fear of losing their children, people who self-harm needing support and often finding that services do not meet their needs. It is about people living with distress, disadvantage and marginalised identities and lives, supporting each other. There is a solid link between the people doing the work and the people they are working with or alongside - that the work comes out of the community or the collective and feeds back into it. The group is articulating what they do, who they work with, why they do it and what they need the money for. One grant recipient referred to this as being 'by the community, for the community'.

This learning led to a new piece of work for NSUN, undertaken by Mark Brown and published in 2020, based on interviews with 19 such small groups: What Do User-led Groups Need?. In this report, the authors suggest that many such groups are better understood as 'mutual aid groups' than as disabled people's user-led organisations (DPULOs) or 'proto-charities'. They observe that these groups have more in common with the communities and people they work with than with definitions of 'user-led groups' which seek to distinguish between user-led and non user-led based on structure, activity of governance. There is a sense of group or community identity, not necessarily based within a 'mental health' identity:

'Such groups had lived experience of multiple forms of discrimination, disadvantage, racialisation or marginalisation. These groups and organisations were not responding to external calls to address mental health related issues in their community, but responding to internal demands within their own communities and deriving from their own experiences.'

This experience has led NSUN to adopt a different perspective towards its remit, its membership and its future work, with perhaps a more inclusive conception of what it means to experience and live with distress, disadvantage and discrimination.

- **An intense experience.** The fund was part of the early, immediate response to Covid, and as such, was intended to get money out quickly. It was an enormous amount of work to turn around in a short period of time. Next time, we would employ a project officer. On this occasion, Emma was employed on a consultancy basis for 2 days a week in addition to most of Zoe's (NSUN administrator, 3 days per week) time being taken on it as well. The process of contacting people, reviewing the applications, keeping the spreadsheets up to date, reporting for the panel was time-consuming and time-sensitive. The panel met every Friday, so there was an immediate deadline for the grant spreadsheet to get to the panel members.
- **Honest and transparent panel discussions.** The panel meetings were helped by the review process undertaken by the core team, so that extra information with a short assessment of each grant was made available. Discussions were felt to be well-managed, frank and honest. People declared a conflict of interest if they knew a group or individual. Generally, discussions began with a quick assessment of grants agreed to be rejected or accepted with those less clear given more time for discussion. It was less easy for those who only took part once or twice to get up to speed with the nature of the applications and assessment process.
- **Rewarding.** Talking to people, connecting with groups and hearing about their work helped to bring the value of the fund and the work of small groups to life. NSUN is not a service provider, so we rarely get this opportunity to have in depth, direct contact with members or beneficiaries.
- **Assistance with applications.** It was important that, where we could see that a group and its application spoke to the spirit of the fund, we could help them to put that into the application format. Not all of the applications were written well in the first place, but where we could see something was a good idea, it was important to reach out to them, ask the right questions and help to turn it into something more obviously fundable.
- **Capacity-building.** The process has grown the capacity of NSUN to do this kind of work. Some of it is routine, much of it needed to be done at speed, but we were able to respond and to make sometimes sensitive and difficult judgments.
- **Challenging our membership and profile.** The fund enabled NSUN to reach a different, perhaps wider audience. We found ourselves reaching more BAME groups, but also many who had not heard of us before and vice versa. Hence, the membership of NSUN has changed as a result of the fund. The publicity about the fund went to mutual aid and voluntary action mailing lists, and consequently reached groups that don't necessarily fall within the mental health sector.

- Small amount of money, big difference. It almost goes without saying - although it needs to be said - that this small amount of money, an average of around £750 and several of less than £200, made a huge difference to these small groups and organisations. We definitely believe that more of these kinds of grants are desperately needed and give enormous value for money: 'It's a small pot of money but it is amazing what you can do with a small pot of money.'

The learning for NSUN

Managing the NSUN Covid-19 Fund was NSUN's defining activity for 2020. As stated earlier (the spirit of the fund), there was some important learning for NSUN in coming to understand the landscape of groups and organisations seeking to support their communities, or specific groups within their communities and the myriad of different ways in which they defined themselves. The experience of managing the fund led to two new projects:

1. **What do user-led groups need?** This project was shaped by NSUN's role as a national network of user-led mental health organisations and its experience of delivering the micro grants programme in the context of the first national pandemic lockdown in 2020. The research looked to understand what challenges user-led mental health organisations face; and to explore what might help them meet their aims and sustain and develop their activities.
2. **Community Constellations:** Community Constellations is a new capacity-building project for the vibrant but precarious user-led and community-led sector in London launching towards the start of the New Year. The project was funded for six months by City Bridge Trust via the London Community Response Fund. The project follows on from the NSUN Covid-19 Fund and is looking to support and network groups and organisations which support people living with mental ill health, distress or trauma.

Finally, it is vital for funders and commissioners everywhere to recognise the value of a seriously small grants fund. There are so many small groups and organisations out there who, for various reasons, are unable or unwilling to try to apply for medium or large grants. They may not have the capacity or resources to embark on the process, they do not want to be funded out of their comfort zone, but they do want to survive and thrive, doing what they do best for their immediate communities.

Appendix A: Evaluation survey questions

1. Your name, the project name, What the was money for
2. Did you find the grant application process easy to negotiate? Y/N/Partially
Please say more:
3. Have you been able to spend the money as you planned? Y/N/Partially
a. If you have answered No or Partially, can you say a bit more about this?
4. Has the grant made a different to your group/organisation? Y/N/not sure
5. Please say a bit more about the difference the grant has made:

For example:

- what the grant has enabled you to do;
- any feedback you have had from members;
- who you have been able to reach or involve as a result of the grant;
- how many people you have been able to support

6. Please describe any challenges you have experienced:

For example:

- difficulties spending the money
- difficulties using the equipment or supplies you spent the money on
- difficulties reaching or engaging people

7. Is there anything else you would like to say about this opportunity:
8. Would you be happy to be contacted either for a case study or short film to demonstrate the value of this fund?
If so, please give the best phone number or email address to contact you on:

Appendix B: Case study questions

We are approaching a small number of the groups funded under the NSUN Covid-19 fund to find out a bit more about the challenges you have been experiencing during this time, and how the fund was able to help. We would also like to learn what we can about your experiences of the funding process - and how it could be improved should we be able to do this again in the future.

1. [Your name, project, location, etc: identifiers]
2. What did you receive funding for:
3. Where did you first hear about the fund? Did you see it advertised anywhere - and if so, where?
4. Was the information about eligibility for the fund clear to you?
If not, can you say what aspects were unclear - and how they might have been improved/made clearer?
5. Did you understand what was meant by 'user-led'? Do you have any thoughts about this terminology that might help us in future funding programmes?
 - a. How does being user-led make the work you do with your group different?
6. What impact did Covid-19 and lockdown have on your group/organisation? What were the main challenges facing you ?
7. To what extent was the NSUN fund able to help you address these challenges? In what ways did your group/organisation benefit from this funding?
8. Would you say that the fund has contributed to the wellbeing of your group/organisation?
Please say more / do you have any examples you can point to / how you know that it has helped in this way
9. Can you describe the characteristics of the people in your group/organisation who have benefitted from the fund: their age, gender, race and ethnicity, sexuality, anything about their mental health status or experiences, disability,
10. If funding were available again, do you think NSUN should continue with this sort of grant making programme? Are there other ways in which NSUN could provide support to groups like yours?

Appendix C: The case studies

361 Life Support

NSUN COVID Fund Case Study

Interview with Alice Smith

The group

361 Life Support was set up by Alice Smith and Tina Makeda early in 2020, to support survivors of domestic violence and child sexual abuse. Initially she was going to call the group 360 (in terms of going full circle to restart your life), but found the concept of finding the extra one step out of the cycle of abuse to be significant and so it became 361. 'The one step is different for everyone'. The original plan had been to deliver the course face to face, but it became online as a result of Covid-19. 361 Life Support won a peer support award for innovation at the Mind Marsh Awards 2020.

There are three people in the team delivering the project. The idea was to run courses for people recovering from abusive relationships and looking for ways to empower themselves, but not for people currently in the middle of a crisis. Alice described this as emotional education created by survivors for survivors. 'We feel that we are uniquely placed to deliver the 361 Recovery programme and 361 Pages, which will not only help women who follow the programmes but - by degrees of separation - their children and wider families'.

Participants on the original course are women, and 361 Sober includes trans and LGBT men and women. Most participants have previous experience of domestic violence, PTSD and some have complex mental health needs.

The grant

The grant was given to fund the development of an online course (361 Recovery), Zoom membership, course facilitators and the production and dissemination of journals for participants in the courses. Alice said she found the information about the fund and the application process to be clear and easy to follow.

She wrote and delivered three online courses with the help of the NSUN Covid grant. The first was 361 Recovery, and the two additional courses were: 361 Pages and 361 Sober; 'so we did loads more than we said we would'. 361 Pages follows a similar 12 week path with more creative writing involved; 361 Sober is for people seeking to remain sober. Journals were sent out to all of the participants in all three courses.

Did you understand what was meant by 'user-led'?

Alice said she was new to the field of mental health and that this term was new to her at first, but now she has begun to use it herself as it clearly applies to their survivor-led ethos. She said she had 'stolen that phrase' and now uses it when talking about the group and publicising the courses.

What impact has Covid-19 had on your group?

361 Life Support were about to start in March 2020; Alice had a room near a park and community centre in mind, where she was planning to run 361 Pages. When the pandemic hit, they had to redesign the course to run online. However, she said that in a strange way, the pandemic worked in their favour because the group has reached more people online than they would have reached in their physical venue. Being online also enables some people to remain more anonymous: they can switch off the screen for the sessions if they wish to.

To what extent was the NSUN fund able to help you address these challenges?

The fund helped to launch the project: 'I don't think it would be here if we hadn't got that, because it was somebody believing in it'. She felt that the project became 'one of the spiritual projects of our time', because it filled a gap and seemed to be better delivered online than it would have been face to face. One of the weeks in the course is called 'lonely versus alone' and it became very relevant taking place at the time of second lockdown.

Has the fund contributed to the wellbeing of your group?

They were able to establish that the mental health of the participants benefitted from the course through asking them at the start and at the end. A few people said that it had changed their lives or given them the tools to change their lives. Several people have made a commitment to going sober as a result of the podcasts, the 361 Recovery programme and the 361 Sober programme. The 361 team have also sent out an evaluation form, the results of which they plan to write up shortly.

Unfortunately Alice's mental health did not benefit; running the course took a tremendous toll on her. It brought up some of her own PTSD and caused her to think about the support that she needed to run the course. One of the participants suggested supporting her by offering a reflective space, which she found really helpful. Alice plans to ensure there is a reflective space for facilitators as part of all future courses. They also offer course participants additional support with coaches in between the course sessions on the 361 Sober course. Previously, she had been overwhelmed by people ringing her in between sessions.

If funding were available again, do you think NSUN should continue with this sort of grant making programme? Are there other ways in which NSUN could provide support to groups like yours?

Alice said that a helpful additional source of support would be to offer small groups a reflective space. She had learnt the value of it but new groups might not realise that they might need this space. Also, she said it would be valuable to have a simple checklist of things to think about for people setting up a new group. She said that NSUN has helped her to navigate this new world, having come from a different background and profession. She finds the newsletter accessible and has attended a lot of online events publicised there.

The group

African Caribbean Forum Kent is a CIC based in Gravesend. They were set up to bridge the gap between African Caribbean community and opportunities available to support them; and to support community cohesion and cultural integration. They currently support 24 members, mostly female and Black African. The ages range from under 25 to over 50. Most of the participant come with anxiety, isolation, bereavement, housing problems, business disruption and unemployment. Normally, the group organises community engagement activities, cultural promotion events, training and trips to local places, outdoor games, and in art & craft sessions.

In their original application, they described disengagement as one of the major problems affecting the community; many people lack information that could be of benefit to their family, life or career. People in their community are experiencing isolation, loneliness and depression. The group has been supporting African communities in Gravesham since 2010 and work in partnership with the council or local groups to reach out to African communities.

The grant

The original application of £1000 was to support 20 African families in the North Kent area who have been affected by COVID-19; whether through bereavement, job loss, isolation, anxiety, trauma, sickness, domestic abuse, homelessness. Providing both online and one-to-one mental wellbeing support; pastoral care and befriending services. They offer support over the phone, share information on mental wellbeing, scam alerts and other helpful support to assist people seeking to go back to work.

They received the funding information update from the NSUN newsletter, and found the information about eligibility clear.

Did you understand what was meant by 'user-led'? Yes

Their management and participants have experienced or are experiencing the issues the group are addressing and share the same background. Some of their volunteers have experienced mental health problems of some kind and they use their experience to support people with similar experiences. For ACFK, the term 'user-led' means making the decision to support people from an informed position; people are supported 'without discrimination or stigmatisation having experienced similar situation previously or presently'.

'The term made us feel important, that our work is being recognised and that our experience is also vital in resolving issues facing people who are experiencing the same fate as our members or volunteers.'

What impact has Covid-19 had on your group?

During the Covid-19 lockdown period, they found that many more people experienced mental health issues. As they were not able to give face to face support, there was more demand in our services. They did offer online support, but some of the older candidates were unable to access or use digital equipment, so they found they were spending more time explaining the process or training them first, before being able to support them.

Covid-19 has increased the demand on their services, time commitment and referrals; more people requiring employment support, accommodation assistance, mental wellbeing, and business support information. There is limited support for grassroots groups, who are really engaging with and supporting local communities at this time. The main challenge is finding funding for running costs to pay for staff, volunteers and publicity. Unfortunately, as they are not able to hold large group sessions, the one-to-one support for people involves more time commitment. They also had to give daily updates the information changes on a daily basis.

To what extent was the NSUN fund able to help you address these challenges?

They described themselves as lucky to get funding of £1000; they were able to get all the required social distancing essentials, approved risk assessment for our new office; and were able to pay staff and volunteers for two months and promote our activities to connect more with target audience.

Has the fund contributed to the wellbeing of your group?

Although only for two months, the funding came at the right time to purchase required PPE and social distancing essentials giving their staff and volunteers the confidence to work. They have been able to provide the support services due to this funding. They have been able to provide online sessions on Mindfulness, Mental well-being, Money/debt management, business bounce back information, overcoming anxiety, psychology of healing, Confidence development, etc. Participants have been 'very happy to attend sessions and responses have been positive'.

'The joy of being able to help those in need, see positive impacts of our activities, always make us feel fulfilled.'

Please say more / do you have any examples you can point to / how you know that it has helped in this way?

They have been able to stay connected with seven elderly Africans experiencing Isolation, anxiety and illness; they provide regular online support and training for them to improve their well-being and become digitally confident. They learn about online safety, use of emails, how to use Zoom to connect with their families and help to set up online banking. They are still enjoying their weekly online training with their volunteers.

They have six participants on employability support and other mental well-being support; getting regular job alert updates, help with updating CVs and interview role play to make them job ready. Two people have been supported back to work; one got a job at a local school as classroom assistant and a bereaved lady was supported back to job at DWP.

They are also working with 11 participants on business support and mental well-being support, assisting them with funding information and applications. Two of them are about to complete their business plan and have been linked with local business support schemes. 'They are now bouncing back to better life.'

Their scam alert and well-being information newsletter is circulated regularly among 120 Africans on our local WhatsApp group. We circulate regular updates from the NHS, Kent Fraud alert, Kent & Medway Clinical commissioning group, Healthwatch, Business network groups, etc.

'The funding has helped us to create awareness and share helpful information in the community; connect with the isolated to reduce loneliness and anxiety; develop bonding and pastoral care with the bereaved; involve more volunteers in helping our community and so on.'

If funding were available again, do you think NSUN should continue with this sort of grant making programme? Are there other ways in which NSUN could provide support to groups like yours?

Yes, please!

'We applied to work with 20 participants, we now have 24 participants, with more referrals coming this week; information circulating to hundreds; we really need to continue the support for our community; we don't want to send people in need away. We will appreciate more revenue grant to support our services continue providing these important help at this crucial time. We are now planning to organise a big online event in October to bring all African businesses and charitable organisations in Kent together with support providers.'

The group

CiLK is a user-led organisation that supports the wellbeing, independence, economic and social inclusion of disabled people living in Kent - helping them achieve equality of involvement and opportunity. They formed in 2003 to offer advice, representation, advocacy and peer support to disabled people in Kent and Medway. Annually they support over 2000 disabled Kent residents. All trustees and staff are disabled or have long term conditions.

They tend to support people of working age and older people, mainly white demographic. They have recently linked with the Ethnic Minority Foundation in Medway in order to reach out to local BAME disabled people.

The grant

The grant was to support the Safety Net project, to cover volunteer training and DBS costs, Zoom costs and laptop. The intention behind this project was to be able to provide people isolated through lockdown and shielding with regular support by phone calls from volunteers. They would also be able to signpost people to other organisations where appropriate.

CILK employed Neville for two days a week to coordinate the project. They have recruited and trained seven volunteers to date. Volunteers have received safeguarding, suicide awareness and project training. DBS checks have been finalised. Beneficiaries are currently being identified, at the time of writing.

Was the information about eligibility clear to you?

The information was absolutely clear; recognised it as fitting their Covid related needs.

Did you understand what was meant by 'user-led'?

Yes, this is their language. As a DPULO, it is core to what the organisation does and means that beneficiaries 'trust us'.

What impact has Covid-19 had on your group?

They had been hearing on social media and through their networks about people being isolated and shielding and this has been creating issues for disabled people and their families. There was a fantastic community response when Covid first hit, but this died away and the strong local network of organisations was picking up that many disabled people were becoming isolated. In addition, many are not strong technologically and are becoming excluded by not being able to afford the technology. Outreach work that would have been done in the past is not happening.

To what extent was the NSUN fund able to help you address these challenges?

It will hopefully support some of the organisation's clients to be socially connected with the volunteers and signposted to other forms of support, advice or advocacy if required. It has been challenging to get the project going on two days a week, but they should be starting shortly. Some of the challenge has come from supporting the volunteers to be able to use the technology. It has also been time-consuming to get everyone through the DBS process. A number of the volunteers have disabilities which presents some problems in terms of management. For example, one has received a third diagnosis and has temporarily withdrawn while she deals with the emotional challenges this presents; and another has been re-diagnosed with spinal compression and is waiting for surgery.

Has the fund contributed to the wellbeing of your group?

They cannot report yet on the contribution of the project to beneficiaries. However, it has given everyone in the organisation a boost and has been well received by stakeholders. Getting this grant enabled them to access further funding, a total of £14.5k to support the project. It will relieve the pressure on staff and enable more efficient signposting so that CILK can focus on the people they can best support themselves.

If funding were available again, do you think NSUN should continue with this sort of grant making programme? Are there other ways in which NSUN could provide support to groups like yours?

The funding has been very useful, although core funding is what they struggle to achieve. Also, it is important for such funding to continue: 'the pandemic is not over and even when it is, disabled people are going to need a lot of support to get them back on track.'

The group

Chime to Thrive was established in April 2019 as a model of support provided by Lauren Jones, a Lived Experience Practitioner (LXP), to people struggling with mental health - to support their recovery and wellbeing, through trauma-informed peer to peer support. They provide compassionate and holistic support, trauma-informed and solution-focussed. People are supported to set achievable goals to move forward in areas of life meaningful to them, recognised as experts in their own experience. Typically, people have weekly sessions of an hour per week, but this varies.

Before Covid-19, it was people not receiving support from mental health services, or not receiving adequate support from services; people who don't fit into a box, lot of co-morbidities, long term problems and experience of trauma. With Covid-19, the aim was to support people impacted in any way by Covid-19. Lauren is currently supporting ten people, all of whom are white, ranging in age from 17 to 55. Several are LGBTQI or struggling with their sexuality at the time of lockdown. 70% are female and most educated to A level. The main thing that they have in common is that they have multiple difficulties, considerable histories of trauma, substance use, severe anxiety and depression and shame relating to these difficulties. Many people have come to her saying 'this is the first time I've said this to anybody'. Also, she has become increasingly aware that the people accessing services seem to be the minority; she feels that an increasing number of people with severe or complex needs are simply not able to access services. She has noted common themes of those who access CHIME to Thrive including: historical and current lack of access to services, lack of trauma-informed approaches within services when they have been accessed, and negative experiences with existing services. Collectively she feels these have had a detrimental impact on wellbeing of those who require support, including through reduced self-esteem, heightened anxiety, self-stigma, perceived stigma, practical implications (e.g. lack of housing), feelings of reduced deservedness in support, reduced trust in services, and reduced hope for the future.

The grant

She found out about the grant through the NSUN newsletter. The grant was awarded to support the training of two Lived Experience Practitioners in order that they could join her in providing ongoing support to people contacting Chime to Thrive. The award paid for their training and session delivery for two months, plus resource creation and supervision. It equates to one session of four hours per week including training, planning, supervision and delivery of sessions. The grant has enabled Chime to Thrive to support more people and to continue to provide free sessions. Previously, the service was offered on a paid basis with an eventual aim for commissioning, but with the onset of Covid-19, she felt that many more people were at increased risk of potentially falling through the net of services. She decided to offer the service for free and the NSUN grant has enabled this to continue.

Was the information about eligibility clear to you?

She found the eligibility really clear; she was passionate about the fund being for user-led non-constituted groups: 'We are not eligible for any other source of funding'.

Did you understand what was meant by 'user-led'?

Chime to Thrive is user-led, and Lauren feels that this offers hope and de-stigmatisation to people. She had just done some research into peer support and recovery in a crisis house she had attended herself and is about to commence a PhD in peer support, trauma and recovery as a 'survivor researcher'. What came up again and again during her preliminary research was that she had 'almost automatic credibility' for having been there, her lived experience giving validity to her research. For work to be user-led means it is valued by service users, it can give people a sense of hope. She also felt that many user-led groups were able to see what was coming with Covid early on because of their/our own experiences and seeing what the gaps would be. Being outside of the system means she is able to be flexible and responsive, understanding that people want support outside 9 to 5 hours. Unlike most mainstream services, she does not have a DNA (Did not attend) policy - 'knowing what mental health means to your life gives a different sense of empathy of what people are going through'.

What impact has Covid-19 have on your group?

Since March 2020 and Covid-19, Chime to Thrive has been at capacity and has barely advertised at all. She is currently supporting ten people at one time (prior to Covid she had aimed to support up to four). A realistic caseload is up to 7 people at one time and supervising others to provide additional support. She has delivered free secure 1:1 video-call sessions to people struggling with their mental health and impacted by Covid-19. A Clinical Psychologist is paid for regular clinical and personal supervision.

She made the decision to offer the service for free when Covid-19 hit, aiming to reach people impacted in any way by the virus and its implications. She has come across people struggling with eating disorders, job loss, lack of access to housing and domestic abuse due to Covid-19. On occasions she has found herself supporting people in acute distress and helping them to access services. Chime to Thrive is not a crisis service, but she can be flexible and support people through a crisis on occasions.

To what extent was the NSUN fund able to help you address these challenges?

"The difference it is making and will continue to make is far reaching, and includes those we support for free who haven't been able to access services or who have inadequate service provision, those I'm able to train and provide fair payment and support to, as well as my own wellbeing: knowing this work was being valued somewhere beyond the direct work I was doing..."

The grant has meant that Chime to Thrive could continue to offer free sessions and begin to expand what they are able to offer, by training two new people with different experiences to complement those of the coordinator leading to long term benefits beyond the immediate Covid-19 response. It has meant being able to pay the new Lived

Experience Practitioners a reasonable way to value them for their work. Lauren has also been able to build her profile in offering training to organisations in trauma and Covid & mental health and tele-health approaches, thus increasing income.

Has the fund contributed to the wellbeing of your group?

It has brought a safety net for many people left stranded by services at this time. She feels that it has had long term impact, including on the two people she has employed through the grant. She feels sure that the support provided to one person helped to prevent a suicide attempt. Other people have contacted them in a crisis due to Covid-19 and its impact on mental health services; although Chime to Thrive is not a crisis service, she has been able to help through providing the opportunity to talk, be heard and validated to reduce the crisis situation. The grant has also helped Lauren herself: 'I felt like quite a lonely fish in a giant pond trying to deliver this support for free...at times, a drowning fish! The grant gave me a boost at a time where I was exhausted and didn't think I would be able to continue to sustain the free support for much longer, now I know I'll be able to do this until at least December, and hopefully much longer term without detriment to my own mental health.'

Testimony from one person supported by Lauren

"Lauren started working with me at the beginning of the COVID Lockdown restrictions. Lockdown was particularly complex for me with my mental health, care and housing situation both affected significantly by the restrictions. Lauren's support came at a time when my usual coping mechanisms, support network and safety were hugely limited or inaccessible, I was not receiving the support I needed from the mental health team and was having difficulty managing a new team of personal assistants supporting me at home - especially with self-isolation and lockdown rules affecting the PAs' ability to support me. Throughout this stressful and uncertain time, Lauren has remained a constant, reliable and validating source of support. Because her sessions are held remotely, this meant I have been able to access them at times that are most convenient to me and even when I have been in places where I couldn't get to a computer, we were able to have our session by phone or by text.

Lauren's understanding of mental health, particularly trauma and anxiety is phenomenal. She very quickly understood me as a person, was able to communicate with me in various states and had taught me a lot about the psychological and physiological aspects of what I experience every day. This, along with gentle validation and appropriate challenges, has helped me understand so much more about my mental health and begin to learn to show a little bit more compassion towards myself. She uses self-disclosure of her own lived experience to an appropriate degree that feels natural and helps me understand that she gets what I am going through, not only from a knowledge level but on a personal level.

Lauren has gone over and above since I have met her. This includes providing my team of personal assistants with remote supervision (in the absence of it being held by the mental health team) which they have found really useful in terms of understanding what they experience supporting me and feeling more supported in their role. This has been invaluable to us in this complicated time."

The group

Community Action to Inspire Hope is based in Durham with members in Durham, Gateshead and Darlington. They describe themselves as a mixed group, with 33 members at the moment and 'remaining open to anyone interested to join us through mouth to mouth communication'. The youngest is 35 yrs old and the oldest 63. They have members from BAME communities, members who identify themselves as males, females and non-binaries.

'What we do have in common is a difficult mental journey in life that bonds us to stick together and offer help to each other.'

The grant

The group received £400 to enable them to deliver a postal project sending creative materials to people at home. The money paid for paper, envelopes, postcards, stamps and paid-for replies. They found out about the fund through the NSUN weekly bulletin.

Was the information about eligibility clear to you?

Initially approaching the fund as an experiment, with no particular expectations, they found the process went smoothly. As an informal group of people with similar interests, they had no previous experience of funding applications. They found the terms of reference accessible and the online form 'applicant-friendly'. They had an online chat, sharing their ideas, which helped to clarify the terms of the grant award.

Did you understand what was meant by 'user-led'?

Community Action to Inspire Hope began with three people who met in a digital storytelling workshop run by the Institute for Medical Humanities, Durham University, where this terminology is used and explained. In addition, quite a few of their members are engaged in NHS or faith based or peer group activities and have come across this 'user-led' through those communities.

What impact did Covid-19 have on your group?

The group were deemed as vulnerable and said they 'suffered disproportionately' from self-isolation. They took the initiative to start an entirely postal project to 'get creative at home' as some of their members were not engaging with technology or had become fed up with it. 'A letter delivered in your home creates such joy!'

To what extent was the NSUN fund able to help you address these challenges?

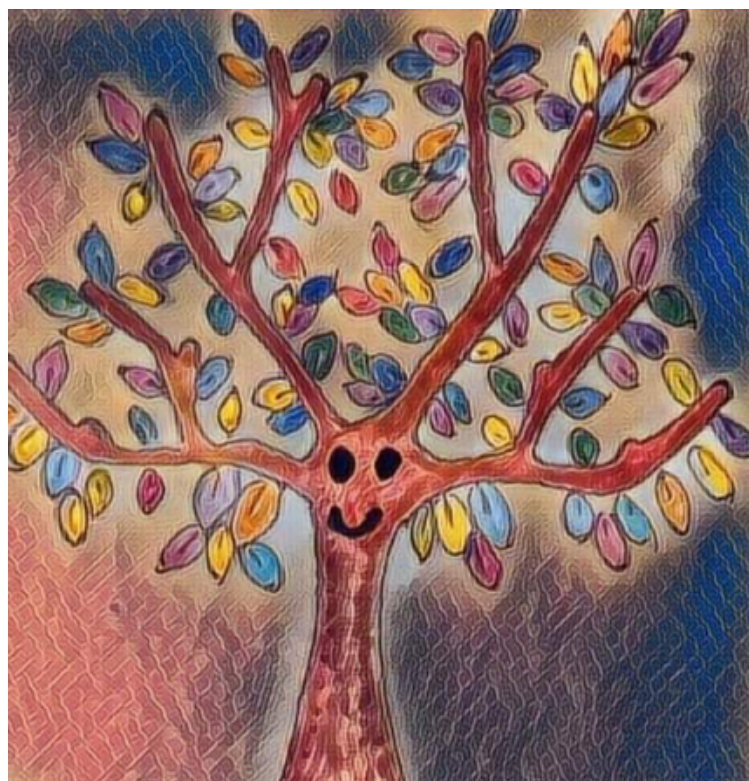
On six occasions between May and June 2020, the co-ordinator sent out 35 envelopes containing poetry and creative reads to members. Each week, she suggested a theme (for example: the art of healing, the tree of life, I am ... a poem) with an invitation to respond in an open and creative way, along with a stamped addressed envelope to facilitate a reply.

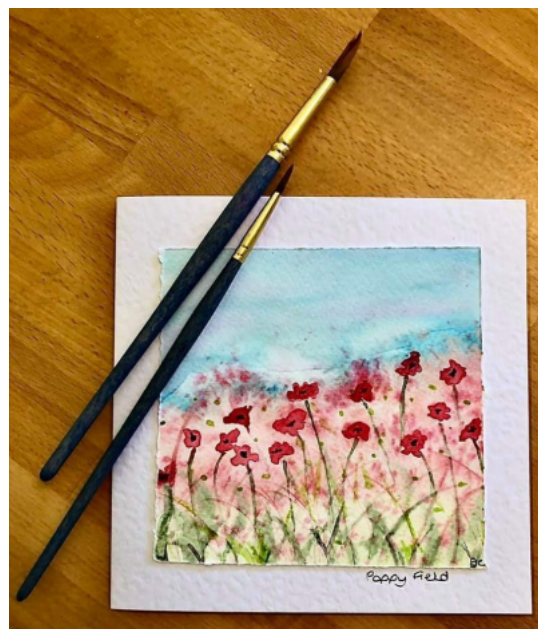
Has the fund contributed to the wellbeing of your group?

'It was delightful to see the creative, colorful, hopeful response from all our members – they all took part at least once.'

The co-ordinator reported that the project has had an 'overwhelmingly positive' effect on their members and they have grown tremendously during this journey. Their most beautiful output has been the collective poem 'We are...' created in the final round of their postal exchanges.

Creative outputs from the group





Excerpt from "We are . . .": a collective poem written by the participants of Community Action to Inspire Hope.

We are dreams from the stars.
 We are a global gathering of greatness!
 We are billions of peas, all in the same pod.
 We are petals of a dandelion blowing love across the world.
 We are sunflowers who turn towards one another when we cannot find the sun.
 We are connected through nature and humanity.

We are STRONGER TOGETHER, we are CONNECTION.
We are the pillars of hope on this planet.
We are connections.
We are the transparency that encourages others.
We are rays of Sunlight coming through the storm.
We are the roots that travel below the surface, connecting and nurturing one another.
We are flowers opening, tender, and strong.
We are heart.
We are the windows we need to see through.
We are the people our ancestors prayed for.
We are the sun behind the clouds just waiting to come out.
We are connected like the sky above us, holding us together.
[...]
We are all connected.
We are huge warm feeling hearts sending out our pain and joys to each other.
We are dream seekers, breaking into the unknown together.
We are JOY!
We are birds in flight moving through the wind.
We are the sage that flows through communities.
We are the breeze that gently moves.
We are one.
We are winds blowing around in this fragmented world, blowing into, around, under, and over each other.
We are brave hearts that open wide to wrap around the Universe.
We are grains of light. We are colours, so beautiful and inspiring.

[Durham, June 2020.]

The group

Ffena is a network of Africans in the UK living with and affected by HIV, enabling people to share their experiences of living with the virus and make their voices heard. Ffena is a Luganda word meaning '[we] all together'. It is a network within the organisation African Health Policy Network (www.ahpn.org.uk/ffena). Prior to Covid-19, Ffena would have regular meetings, groups inviting speakers on different issues, opportunities particularly for older people with HIV to meet each other. Many of their members are living with chronic conditions now that they are growing older with HIV.

The grant

With the grant, they bought 30 tablets and mobile phones for their members to help them connect to family and access services. They now connect via WhatsApp, Facetime and Zoom. They have Zoom meetings twice a week. One of the members has a studio in his house and he does talk shows: 'Let's talk about it', which take place on Mondays. Messages went round like wildfire that Ffena had tablets for their members; members who had fallen out of contact came back to them because they heard this was going on. Was the information about eligibility clear to you?

The fund was seen in the NSUN newsletter. and thought 'let me try'. It was really straightforward, she said. Funding is so difficult to find, 'let alone funding to buy gadgets to get people connected'.

What impact has Covid-19 had on your group?

All of their groups and meetings had to stop. People were disconnected, missing each other and fearful about the confusing messages coming out about the coronavirus. Prior to this, they used to have lunch together, with everyone sitting together, attend weekly movies in Black History Month and speakers on such things as breast cancer, diabetes and hypertension. They used to meet in the office and go out for lunch. 'They love hugs. Oh my god. They miss it now'. It just changed everything.

There is a lot of misinformation about the vaccine now, and some people are expressing reluctance to take it whereas others are keen. This can be difficult and she is trying to give the message that it is their choice.

To what extent was the NSUN fund able to help you address these challenges?

'Look at the difference that it makes! A lot, I'm telling you.' The WhatsApp group is so active that Maureen has had to put her phone on mute some of the time. It has made such a difference. 'They are so connected, so knitted.' They have managed to support over 60 members and are still working on the few members in other satellites services. Some of the younger ones are surfing now, using Instagram and Google. The middle group are still on Zoom attending events, such as an event tonight with the Mayor on domestic violence. The older ones don't want to connect with Zoom. They have mobile

phones, and she does video calls with them. They can't understand when they see all these people on the screen - 'are they all in your house?! This is something that has never happened to them. 'Without you we would never have done this.'

They sometimes put people in groups according to their language and cultural background, in order to help people in the understanding of the information around Covid-19. In the first phase, they used video calls only, but now it is becoming easier with Zoom and WhatsApp.

On World Aids Day, they organised a Zoom session for an hour and a half, with some of the members taking lead roles. One led poetry session, another did the vote of thanks, another the candle lighting for the minute silence. They had the Mayor of Enfield speaking as well as the Director of the African Health Policy Network and someone from the Citizen's Advice Bureau talking about benefits.

Has the fund contributed to the wellbeing of your group?

It has contributed massively. If it had not been for this fund, 'we would not be where we are today'. Some of the members are so grateful for the tablets, so they don't want to let us down when there are events. They are engaging with the organisation in an amazing way. They log on and participate actively.

'NSUN, whatever you did, whoever came up with this idea, you have made the difference... I just feel good when I can put a smile on someone's face'.

Please say more / do you have any examples you can point to / how you know that it has helped in this way

She has had to help some people individually to connect. One person was given a mobile phone but did not answer it. Maureen called her on the landline and then called her on the mobile at the same time, so that she could tell her how to connect. She said 'Oh my god I see you!' She was so happy! 'Mama, I made it!'. Maureen then rang to connect this same woman with the Director and she was able to see that he was on a ferry at the time, and was amazed to be able to see him and the water he was crossing.

The group

Five survivors of mental distress organise Fruitcake Creatives: they were originally set up to do the Largactyl Shuffle walks, which is a way for people to meet and support each other. They are a group of survivors, meeting up through walks and coffee meet-ups, based in Southwark, South London. The group are mostly over 40 years of age, have diverse conditions and backgrounds. There are more women than men, and many of the women experience high anxiety.

The grant

They applied for the grant to enable them to try out leading virtual walks around the City, with people following them on Facebook Live.

Was the information about eligibility clear to you?

It was really clear; as she is dyslexic, she normally needs to get people to read over forms she has filled in: 'this was the only form I've ever filled in in my life that I didn't need someone else to go through'.

Did you understand what was meant by 'user-led'?

She did understand the term 'user-led', it is people with lived experience leading the group. So, if it is a group for working class guys, it will be led by working class guys. She said she finds that groups often say they are user-led when they are run by professionals which is problematic. In mental health, there is a lot of being 'done to'; it is important that people are in control. A lot of peer roles are taking place in a medicalised context. 'In a user-run group, you can take the medicalised out and just be yourself'.

What impact has Covid-19 had on your group?

There has been a lot of fear in the group. One person bought a respiratory mask with oxygen filter, which cost a lot of money. A few people have been hoarding out of fear; one person bought a lot of perishable goods which the group shared out between them. Another person has hoarded enough that it is getting difficult to get in her front door. She said it is understandable, because people are very frightened. There is another person who believes the whole thing is a hoax, which in some ways is more difficult for them to deal with.

Before Covid, the walks and meetings would attract between 12 and 20 people; since Covid, there have been around six. The virtual midnight walk, which was run in June, attracted round 63 people and they now have as many as 300 people following their London night walks. They advertised on Facebook and attracted people from as far away as the U.S. Another issue that this brought to the surface was disability access; they had a wheelchair user following the walk who was really excited about seeing his way around the City. It suggested to her the need to think about and learn from the use of virtual technology as a means to aid access for some people.

To what extent was the NSUN fund able to help you address these challenges?

The fund made a 'big difference'. It meant that they were 'able to do something'. It also gave them the breathing space to try out virtual walks, whilst they re-negotiated with their other funder to use that money in a similar way. 'We could then say to our other funder we have tried it out and it worked'. (The other funding was for a live group in Bermondsey, but the venue is still closed so this became impossible).

They have begun to carry out virtual walks using Facebook Live; this means that people can connect and follow the walk from anywhere. The grant has enabled them to buy more data and batteries, which are quite expensive and they need a lot of them to enable the walks to take place. They have also found someone to put their website together; although they did not have enough money to complete this, they are hoping to have it up by December. They have commissioned a logo for the group. They have found that most things take much longer than you expect due to Covid - many people are affected, anxious or unwell.

A small group of them managed to meet up for a coffee, which was 'really worth it'.

They have not spent all of the money yet, with delays to the website and logo, but plan a Christmas walk based on the Christmas Carol, visiting relevant places in the city. One of the challenges has been to find that they don't have all of the skills that they need, so they have had some training for social media skills on video.

Has the fund contributed to the wellbeing of your group?

'It has lifted up people's spirits'. It has been good to spread it over the year not knowing when Covid might go away. Having the Christmas walk to look forward to is good, people need something to look forward to as we potentially head for further restrictions. She talked of the way in which the media has suggested that we cancel Christmas, and that newspapers 'don't realise how much they affect people's mental health'. Brexit is also affecting her group; one member does not have a British passport and is anxious about that.

If funding were available again, do you think NSUN should continue with this sort of grant making programme? Are there other ways in which NSUN could provide support to groups like yours?

Absolutely! She has been attending Survivors' Poetry as well, which also got a grant from NSUN. The whole group could have fallen apart, and Survivors' Poetry has been brilliant, 'it gave me a window on the world when my partner was ill'. She said that a tiny group can make a real difference to people: they are there, on the ground, doing things that people need. Larger organisations are at a different level, not so personal. She gave an example of visiting a group member who lives alone and was recently bereaved; 'small groups can do that so easily.'

In relation to other support to small groups, she said it would be useful for NSUN to produce more of the short videos. She wondered if this current opportunity might lead to

more of the same, with the Government giving more money to be distributed to small groups. Another issue she thought NSUN could address is digital exclusion: people need teaching, showing how to use the technology or they will be cut out of what is going on. Even their benefits are online. She was not sure how NSUN might address this, but feels it is a really important issue. 'It is nice to see NSUN having more of a lead on those sorts of things', and thought perhaps it is an issue to raise at the AGM.

The group

Make Space was established by four people in response to Covid, with the aim of giving space for people to talk about care, Covid and self harm. The aim was to reach both people who experience self-harm and those who support them from different roles and perspectives. They are still working out their next steps. They plan to register or incorporate themselves in some way, perhaps register as a CIC so that they have legal standing and can access further funding.

Previous events the group has been involved in have focused on carers, schools and family members, people without the training around self-harm but with the desire to know how to respond better and help people who are self-harming. The group talked about offering the space to younger people, but decided to offer it to anyone who approached them. This was based on the fact that it is often assumed that self-harm affects primarily younger people, but this narrative can be unhelpful, in that it can be excluding and shaming for older people who self-harm and find it harder to access services.

The grant

Veronica found out about the fund from the organisation Self injury Support, with whom the group have links. They asked for the money in order to run two separate online events, partly to gauge the need and the potential for Make Space to find a role for itself. At the time of interview, they had run one and were due to run the second one on 22 October. They are also booked to run another event in December for medical students. The first event funded by the NSUN grant was a new departure for the group, in that it created a space for people who self-harm to talk about it openly and without judgement. In their review of the first event, they were clear that they would like to continue to offer an online space for people who self-harm. However, it can be an intense space and they wanted to be able to offer one-off counselling or debriefing sessions for anyone distressed by the event. They offered half hour sessions with a therapist member of the group which was funded by the NSUN grant. For the future, this means that they need to have enough funds behind them to be able to make that offer each time as, ideally, they would like to offer this kind of space every other month.

The second session, to be held on the 22 October, will be for people who support people who self-harm, with the aim of sharing learning around helpful responses.

Was the information about eligibility clear to you?

She said that, as a group, they have thought about language a lot; in the context of self-harm, 'service user' does not always hold meaning. Many people never access services, so it is important to think about language that is inclusive. She worries that framing self-harm in relation to service use 'slides into a place where that service might be A&E' so unfortunately it plays into the logic of self-harm where, if you don't reach A&E perhaps you are not hurting yourself enough. It is important to think these issues through.

Did you understand what was meant by 'user-led'?

[As above.] 'For those of us with a good sense of activism and the history of it, it is clear where those terms come from. It is clear to us that it meant somebody with lived experience.' As a group, they all have different experiences of mental distress and self-harm, whether or not it fits with the conventional image of self-harm. It is impossible to find language that suits everyone. She said that she trusts NSUN to find the right terminology; that it is more important to see how the language figures in the context of action, and that people will understand it in context of 'the excellent work NSUN does'.

What impact has Covid-19 had on your group?

At the basis of what they do is the experience and the learning that talking about self-harm is difficult - and the space to do so has been limited by Covid. This adds to the shame around self-harm, and affects people accessing and asking for help and receiving help. Self-harm can be a private experiences, and hearing people talk about it in cruel or unhelpful ways exacerbates the situation. They work in a way in which they respond to people without requiring the self-harm to stop. This is the common response and is often unhelpful. It is common for people living alongside someone who self-harms to feel it is their responsibility to stop it from happening. They try to reframe the encounter away from that towards engaging with distress and with difficulty, to make the engagement possible. However, people have become more isolated during Covid, and less able to use their usual coping strategies or connect with their supportive networks.

On the other side, some people might find themselves living with someone who is self harming and worrying about how to support them. Others might be concerned about accessing more formal support and not sure how to go about it. The group has been approached by teachers, and social prescribers, people who have no training but a lot of care and interest in how to support people better.

To what extent was the NSUN fund able to help you address these challenges?

The grant has funded two events, one for people who self-harm and the second for supporters and carers. The first event, with the theme of Care, Covid and Self Harm, went very well. The space gave people the opportunity to talk about what it is like to experience self-harm at this time and space for people to talk about care. They used the term Care to include all aspects of care: physical treatment in A&E, GP services, established support services, care that you might normally receive as part of your networks of family and friends unable to connect with during Covid, and care you might normally take for yourself which has been disrupted. They decided on a small number of people as the group was online, and they wanted to ensure it was as safe as it could be; it was attended by 10 or 12 people.

It was an intense space but she said she felt it remained safe; there was some good positive feedback, with people saying it was really helpful to talk to other people with similar experiences. The feedback supported their belief that there are few places for people to talk about self-harm. People also talked about the range of things changed by the pandemic; e.g. the prospect of attending A&E being affected by an increased fear of your own risk of infection plus the moralising sense of not going to A&E unless you really

'need' it - so it has become a more fraught space.

They thought about the risks in advance of the event and how to mitigate them; one of the important issues was to ensure people were responded to with empathy (all of the group have some experience of self-harm) - and people found that really helpful. They tried to be quite clear about the limitations of what they could offer, in that it was a one-off event and not a workshop or research, but some of the constructive feedback suggested that the aim of the event was not entirely clear. Some people definitely want something to be ongoing, so they are going to look at what funding they can get and plan for the future.

Has the fund contributed to the wellbeing of your group?

It made a huge difference to the organising group; it meant that they were able to run two events, 'but it has set us up to run more'.

People who attended the first group did say they found the event helpful; many had felt very alone and this helped them feel less so. It helped to hear from people with similar experiences, and to be responded to with empathy 'as if their experience made sense'. As it was a one-off event, the impact is hard to quantify - but the very fact that participants expressed the wish for something ongoing suggests that the space was valued.

Veronica said that she would give us feedback about their second event, on the 22nd.

If funding were available again, do you think NSUN should continue with this sort of grant making programme? Are there other ways in which NSUN could provide support to groups like yours?

Whilst further funding would be welcome, she said she understood the complexity of decision-making and of identifying the funding available. She was very appreciative of the work NSUN is doing in general and trusted us to find ways of supporting small groups even if the funding was not available to continue grant funding.

The group

Men Up North was set up to provide empathic support for men of all ages, regardless of background, age or heritage. Their stated aim is to change the statistics about male suicide through normalising conversations about mental health and masculinity. Prior to Covid-19, they provided a range of groups, coaching sessions and meet-ups, and a 'Dads in Business' support group in Sheffield, providing spaces in which men could talk if they wished to do so.

The grant

Men Up North received two grants. Angga couldn't remember where they found out about the grant; the main two places they find out about sources of funding from are South Yorkshire Funding Advice and Funding Central. The first was to purchase a laptop and Zoom subscription plus training for members to use the technology. The second grant was awarded to enable the group to respond to their members' need to access outside space. Following interviews and an online survey, they found that the men wanted to be able to access outside space in order to meet safely and find things to do. Consequently, they decided to rent an allotment and pay for a gardener and tools to create a 'community garden where we learn, grow and create a community of 'outdoors champion' BAME men'.

Was the information about eligibility clear to you?

Yes, it was clear; they always make sure to have people check over for grammar and checking it makes sense, but the form was straightforward.

Did you understand what was meant by 'user-led'?

He understood this to mean 'by the community, for the community' and this is how they are; and every idea they have comes from their community. They will gather ideas and check them out with the wider group. In this case, there was a lot of enthusiasm for the allotment and the walks, a way to engage with nature as well as meet up safely.

What impact has Covid-19 had on your group?

The group's activities were fully offline before the onset of Covid-19. It was difficult to shift everything online; whilst there was no problem establishing a Zoom meeting, it was the community itself that struggled. Some men in the over 45 age group were not used to the use of technology or had basic phones, some were reluctant or simply did not want to meet in this way. It was clear that some members of their community were not being served, many were experiencing isolation and loneliness, with an increased demand coming to the group through Facebook.

Now, they are entering a new period as there may be renewed restrictions to come. There are more people off furlough and losing their jobs, the expectation that this was coming to an end is not being realised. People are feeling trapped, alone and anxious. It is a

difficult time.

To what extent was the NSUN fund able to help you address these challenges?

They have the Zoom groups every week, and they can carry that on at least for the year of the subscription. They have paid for the allotment for two years, which had been overgrown for several years. They split the session into two: they meet up for two hours of physical work and then use a shelter on a neighbouring allotment for two hours of talking and sharing food. As a part of that, they have been asking the group 'what does a self-facilitated group look like?', inviting the group to reach agreement and understanding of 'how do we show up in this space'. They found that some of the men might simply want to turn up and work, whilst others need to be heard and listened to. They will start with a check-in round and they will say what they need from today's session.

They have also organised four foraging groups with an experienced forager, in which the men are going to places they have never been to before. They are in nature, learning the plants and how to forage and what to look for. In total, they have had 33 men attending the walks. The next one will be in the Spring, as it's getting darker now.

At first, they had around 8 to 12 people turning up to the gardening sessions, now they have a core of seven men. Some are part of the ongoing Zoom groups and some are not. The foraging walks tend to attract the older men, who don't join the Zoom groups. They might hear about the walks through Facebook, which they use a lot, or Eventbrite.

The allotment sessions tend to attract the younger men, many who have been feeling isolated and anxious. It has been interesting for some meeting in real life after meeting on Zoom. It gives them contact, connection, enables a deeper conversation to take place online when they have met outside. One member found an article that said Germany had prescribed fresh air during Covid.

They have not done the cooking project yet, which was part of the original plan. They decided to focus on being outside while they could and plan to arrange Zoom online cooking sessions for people to participate in from home as the days grow shorter and colder and Covid restrictions return.

Has the fund contributed to the wellbeing of your group?

The grant has made a real difference, particularly to the older men. They did not anticipate the challenge of engaging them in online groups, so the grant enabled them to pilot something and learn from it: 'thank you for trusting in us'. They can learn from this, they have a space now that anyone in the community can use. They are thinking of having a family day where people can bring their families. People feel more connected as a community. He gave an analogy: that it had been like 'a deep breath for the community and for the men that have participated... life currently is full of really shallow breaths'.

For some of the men, taking part in the Zoom groups has been like going down the pub and seeing their mates; it gives them a sense of community, they are grateful, thankful

for the continued space to meet. People send their apologies if they can't make it - which Angga felt they wouldn't do if they didn't value it.

Please say more / do you have any examples you can point to / how you know that it has helped in this way

There is one young man, an immigrant from Columbia, who has been receiving NHS mental health support for years. He had been feeling lonely, isolated, suicidal. He found Men Up North through Facebook and came along to an allotment group, looking nervous and quiet. He was immediately invited to help cutting the hedges and when he joined the circle afterwards, he said 'that was hard work!' but said he felt welcomed and accepted as he is. He was able to be open about himself, and able to contribute his hard work, said he felt useful for the first time in a long time. 'This small feeling of usefulness is what gives him hope'. As an arts creative mentor, he is hoping to run art classes for the community in the future.

Angga said many men, when they lose their work, lose their sense of value in the world; it perpetuates negative cycles and a tendency to catastrophise. Participation in activities like this can give people back a sense of value, and the opportunity to grow and flourish and enter into meaningful conversations.

If funding were available again, do you think NSUN should continue with this sort of grant making programme? Are there other ways in which NSUN could provide support to groups like yours?

Yes - it was the flexibility and openness, the ease of application made it possible.



The group

Migrant Empowerment Group or MEG started as a voluntary group in July 2013 in Wolverhampton. It was founded by a former Asylum seeker and became a Registered Charity in June 2019 through its main proposal titled “The prevention or relief of poverty among the UK’s population especially for Refugees and Asylum Seekers for their Social Integration within their Communities in the West Midland and in the UK”. Their main beneficiaries are refugees and asylum seekers, children and families.

The grant

They found out about the fund from a voluntary sector funding bulletin. Concerned about the additional isolation brought about by Covid-19, they applied for the grant to support their sewing project for disadvantaged families, an extension of their work to help re-introduce traditional sewing skills into families. The money helped pay for sewing machines and materials as well as Zoom. Following the first grant, they had a sewing group once a week, every Monday. With the second grant, they extended to more people and more groups, meeting Monday, Weds and Saturday. She is still working those days mainly on Facebook and remains very busy.

They found the application process was very straightforward, and noted in particular that it was easy to understand for someone for whom English is a second language. When they found out about the second round of grants available, Alvine said ‘we were dancing like it was Christmas day’.

What impact has Covid-19 had on your group?

They found that their members were suffering from depression and loneliness; some could not understand how they would survive lockdown: they had no families, and no one to call. Some people who had not experienced mental health difficulties before, now found themselves experiencing depression and loneliness. Some have experienced domestic violence and relationship breakdown, and children have experienced mental health difficulties as well.

To what extent was the NSUN fund able to help you address these challenges?

The technology has helped people to connect. Many were given tablets and some were given sewing machines. She said that everybody ‘loves the technology’. They have come together like a family. One person wanted to know how to do her hair during lockdown, and a hairdresser taught women to do their hair by themselves online. Sometimes they finish with sewing and stand up and do exercise. Alvine was profoundly appreciative of the grant.

They have reached people across the UK, even across the world with some people connecting in Africa, Nigeria, Canada. She said that Covid has its negative side but it has its positive sides as well. ‘Your grant helped me to learn more about social media, it helped us to learn to monitor the platform’.

Children have learnt to sew as well; for example, they have been taught how to put on a button on, how to hold the needle properly. They gave out prizes for the best buttons, sending a certificate to the child who did the best one.

Has the fund contributed to the wellbeing of your group?

It has definitely contributed to their wellbeing through enabling people to feel connected and less isolated. 'I can't finish telling you the positive side of this'. 'I can't stop talking, this platform really did something for us.'

She gave an example of a woman with a blind son who made contact with MEG for the first time in lockdown. She was desperate to find someone to connect with, as her son was experiencing severe anger and frustration. MEG was able to connect her with another family who had a disabled child. Now they chat online regularly and they are best friends. It transformed their lives.

Another Zimbabwean woman with kidney failure was going to hospital three days a week. She had no one at home to support her, but after connecting on the MEG Zoom page, she reached out to people who were able to come and volunteer to help her.

Challenges

The one challenge has been the end of the funding: 'our people don't understand the programme has finished.' When the programme came to an end, they organised a WhatsApp group and they are active on Facebook. Some people continue ringing in for help with their sewing and she continues to help them and maintains connection through phone and Facebook.

Final comments

'Thank you. You have helped our group connect together, put a smile on their face, shown that you can learn even at home'. Their group have this as their motto: "Be Proud. Be Happy. Own your destiny now."

She finished by saying 'You do not have to be rich, beautiful or perfect to make a difference in someone's life. You just have to care enough.'

The group

SISH is a small community group supporting people who self harm. There are five people facilitating the group to meet, with some doing the background administrative work. Generally, the people who attend can be people with long term experience of using mental health services, both men and women. It is an older demographic than is often thought to be typical of self harm, so people in their thirties, forties and fifties. They are predominantly white, although the facilitating group are from diverse backgrounds. They tend to be isolated and experiencing complex physical health problems as well, and perhaps feel that they don't fit into other services. A characteristic of the group is that it is open-ended and does not impose a goal or limit the number of sessions, so it suits people who need that open space.

They have run a personal development course alongside the group three times: 'trying to better understand your self-harm'. This was more structured, and aimed to help people understand their own patterns and triggers, what function self harm has in their lives. This was always well attended and evaluated very positively. This might be something they could run again.

The grant

The grant was originally intended to enable the group to go online, but when they realised that it was not going to be that easy to do this, they offered to return the grant. However, NSUN was very flexible about how it was spent, and encouraged them to consider using it to help them resolve this period of uncertainty. 'So that was really, really helpful.'

Was the information about eligibility clear to you?

Yes, it was really clear; it was important to see that they were eligible as a small group not registered as a charity or CIC. The way that community groups were described made it clear that they would be eligible

Did you understand what was meant by 'user-led'?

Yes, having worked in this area for a long time, this terminology was clear. In the wider disability sector, the term DPULOs (Disabled People's User Led Organisations) is often used and that is understandable in that context. It might be that some community or peer support groups would not understand 'user-led' but with the experience of her day job as well (for Self-Injury Support), she was very familiar with it.

What impact has Covid-19 had on your group?

The group had to stop running completely. They were meeting in a small room rented from Bristol Mind, too small to be safe under Covid restrictions and social distancing. In addition, the group has never taken or recorded names; people could attend under an assumed name or just give a first name to remain anonymous. Their ethos has been to offer a safe and confidential space, so they were unable to contact members to let them

know about the changes. 'These quiet, anonymous spaces are dwindling'. They put up a sign on the door, publicised it on social media and let other organisations know that the group had stopped running.

'There was quite a lot of guilt, and some felt maybe we should have tried to keep it going, but under the circumstances, it just wasn't really possible and viable.'

The group has not found an alternative, as remote or online meetings would not have the same ethos as their face-to-face group: it would mean asking for people's contact details whether they went online or were able to find a venue to meet face-to-face because of track and trace. 'So it's almost like being put in this weird position of challenging the very nature of what our grassroots group is'. The issue has raised strong feelings in the group and as yet they have not found a way forward.

Another challenge to the prospect of going online is the fact that many people who normally attend the group would not have access to the technology, so it would mean setting up a different group and excluding those who normally attend.

In terms of the wider impact of Covid on people who self-harm, she is aware that there is likely to be more isolation, stress and pressure on people, leading to greater risk and less access to sources of support and things that help. Different members of the group are experiencing different levels of these stresses too, and all are volunteers so it is hard to push for people to respond.

To what extent was the NSUN fund able to help you address these challenges?

They have not spent the money as yet, but they are planning to use it to meet up as the coordinating group, to work out a way forward. They applied for money to pay for someone to facilitate the group to discuss what they want to do, explore their options. There are strong feelings in the group about not doing something different, that it is not what they are trained for, and some concerns about the idea of supporting people within their own homes.

Has the fund contributed to the wellbeing of your group?

For the organising group, it has helped in that it has created the space in which they can have the conversation about the way forward.

If funding were available again, do you think NSUN should continue with this sort of grant making programme?

Yes, it might be useful to restrict the funding or support to non-constituted groups, possibly ring-fencing funding for those groups specifically. It can be just one or two people holding together a small group: 'making sure that there is support for these really organic spaces is just really helpful.' They can't be commissioned into existence; they just kind of evolve in response to a local need, but without any infrastructure or support, they are very difficult to sustain.

SODIT : Survivors of Depression in Transition
NSUN COVID Fund Case Study
Interview with Steph De La Haye

The group

SODIT (<https://sodit.org/>) is a women's charity providing peer support for women experiencing depression and other mental distress in Sheffield. They began as a group of women in need of support when discharged from, and unable to access, NHS services. They currently support women from different ethnic backgrounds and from LGBT communities, and have staff and volunteers who reflect those communities. From the beginning, they have supported women with multiple disabilities, and although the majority are in the 40-55 age range, they are increasingly seeing younger women. They have found more younger women coming to them since Covid and some come with multiple abuse issues exacerbated by living with family in lockdown. Sometimes this means providing sensitive support if the women can only speak when outside the house. They have a paid counsellor who tends to support women who come with more complex needs; she has been talking to social services about safeguarding, with some younger people directly as a result of Covid. In the last month, they have had a lot of referrals from homeless women and sex workers referred by the homeless team.

The grant

The grant awarded was to enable them to purchase two laptops, mobile phones with credit and Zoom subscription. They first found out about the fund through an NSUN Trustee as well as seeing it advertised through the other channels, the NSUN bulletin and social media. They had thought about applying for the main Mind Fund, but found that the resources required to apply and sustain it were too great when they were facing such a demand on their services. The NSUN fund was perfect for what they needed: the money to enable them to update and add to their digital equipment at a time when it was badly needed. It was specific, quick, and they were able to purchase the equipment within a week of getting the money.

Was the information about eligibility clear to you?

Yes. It was really clear; the only thing that she questioned was, whether as a small charity they were eligible when the fund seemed to be directed at non-constituted groups. Otherwise, the paper work and the interview with Emma were fine, 'I don't think really it could be made clearer.'

Did you understand what was meant by 'user-led'?

Steph described herself as 'a bit of a purist' and feels that user-led should mean completely user-led. Having said that, she said any fund (or organisation setting up to employ people) should discuss and come to a consensus about the definition they are going to use; so, NSUN as a user-led organisation supporting user-led groups and organisations should have their own definition. This could include the inclusion of people who don't use services but whose experience of distress has remained outside services.

What impact has Covid-19 had on your group?

SODIT have gone from supporting around 30 women to 50 in a number of ways, such as the groups, text support, phone support, Facebook groups, WhatsApp, helpline, one-to-one therapy and their 'holding and check-in' service.

Like so many organisations based on peer support, they had to stop everything face to face. This also included projects they were working on, which have been massively impacted. For example, they had just started a project exploring co-production with SCIE, and only did one workshop before lockdown. She said it was difficult at that time, but it is also difficult again now with the changes and restrictions coming into place. 'We are very hands on, person-centred, creative, it's all very difficult to do on Zoom.' The Co-production Festival, which was going to take place in co-production week, had to be cancelled. Fortunately, the funders have been great about postponing it to next year.

Some people were very anxious about being unable to attend peer support groups and counselling. It was a big shock to the system: everything closed suddenly. The biggest impact that they, as a service, can have on people is that human contact, the social connection. They tried to reassure people that they were not going to stop, and began to work out how to support people. They went through a process of finding out what people had in terms of equipment, and trying to communicate with people about where they were. They support women from diverse backgrounds: homelessness, sex workers, some of whom might have a phone but no credit or data, so there was the risk of digital exclusion. They began to look at the alternatives, and the different platforms they could use to capture and support everybody: 'That takes time and a lot of work to get that organised.'

They don't think that they lost contact with anyone as a result of Covid. With their focus on self-empowerment, they encouraged people to set up their own WhatsApp groups as well as setting up groups themselves. They started doing support packs for people. It was a question of going through the whole process, and thinking how they could offer different ways of communication: 'It's been quite a journey, to get all those things in place to make sure people are connected.' The Helpline has been successful; even people they already support are using that now and they hope to continue it post-Covid. There are still massive challenges, because some people are desperate to meet face to face. They are just now starting some face to face work, with Covid secure guidelines in their drop-in which is big enough to be safe.

To what extent was the NSUN fund able to help you address these challenges?

The fund helped SODIT to organise home-working for staff and volunteers, and to put in place new or revised policies on safeguarding, information about data management and so on. They also created a Covid-specific helpline, which meant creating a training package for people with help from the Helplines Association. The extra mobile phones helped communication and for the Helpline, keeping it separate from people's personal phones. They can offer text support as well. 'if we didn't have those things we'd be struggling to be as safe and secure with our platforms as we are now.' The extra equipment contains the service better for people working from home and keeps everyone

safer: 'the quality of support is as good as we can get it.' It has made a tangible difference around the safety and the quality of the support they are able to give.

They have had brilliant feedback; generally speaking people are just so thankful to have this ongoing support. Although there was a slight pause as they transitioned to remote and online contact, they were able to maintain contact with the use of traditional phone and texting. The continuity of support has been hugely valued. They have carried out a small survey on how Covid has affected people, which they are currently in the process of writing up. Many people have talked about feeling abandoned by NHS services, which seemed to disappear overnight for some people. They have been very grateful for the continuity of support offered by SODIT and the fact that volunteers can help them to make the connections they need to resolve practical issues. One example of this was the renewal of a bus pass which caused considerable anxiety for a woman who had no means of contacting the relevant agency.

'The NSUN package has made a concrete difference; we are able to support people in a way that's safe and secure, with things that work, they're not breaking down [...] To get the grant really quickly as well, get the laptops and phones out to people within a week.'

Has the fund contributed to the wellbeing of your group?

People have gained reassurance from the fact that SODIT is still there and they can feel connected; they can stay in touch with the group on WhatsApp, by phone and text. It has helped the wellbeing both of the people they support and of the team and the latter is really important. Being able to acquire the technology meant such a huge difference to the team: having it all working properly reduced their anxiety and meant that they were not having to fire-fight all the time.

The wellbeing of the people they support is sustained as a consequence of having the additional technology: it helped them to deliver more stable and safe support groups and counselling, to have choices. They also set up a helpline specifically for people affected by Covid, and the additional technology meant that the team could offer this safely.

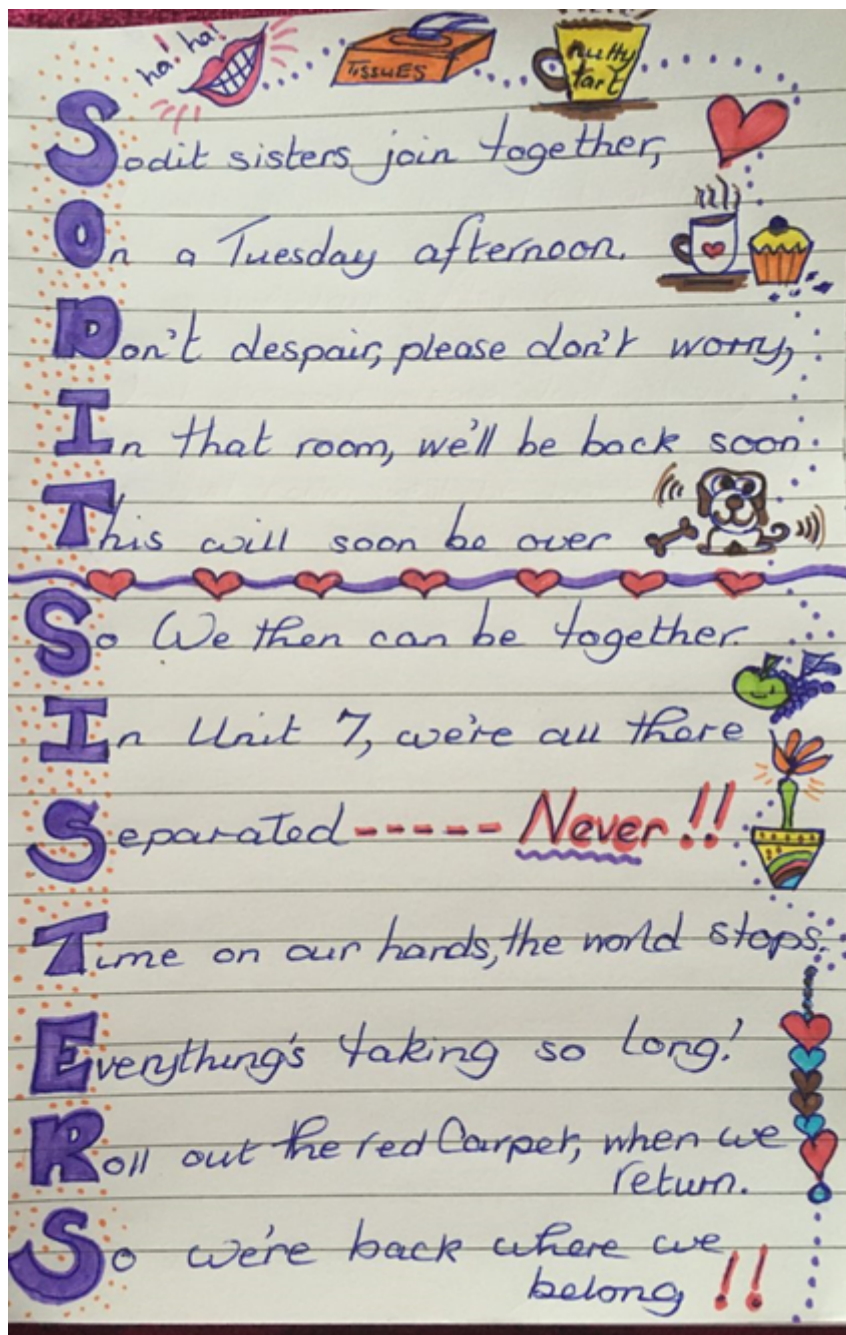
If funding were available again, do you think NSUN should continue with this sort of grant making programme? Are there other ways in which NSUN could provide support to groups like yours?

Yes. Steph said she is passionate about advocating for small user-led organisations who often lose out when it comes to funding; many are struggling and closing down. Most funding sources require organisations to fit into the right box and to have the capacity to respond to funder's requirements; they exclude small and unconstituted groups. This fund has been hugely valuable, possibly unique, in offering funding to groups without a bank account. Its value is in funding grassroots activism: people who are getting together and doing something, which is exactly how SODIT started. 'It's a small pot of money but it is amazing what you can do with a small pot of money.' It is more inclusive of the vast range of organisations that would struggle to access those larger pots of money.

She finished by saying it would be great if there could be similar opportunities in the future: an ongoing alternative for small pots of money can be used more creatively. It

could be a valuable role for NSUN to undertake in an ongoing way, supporting and campaigning for small user-led groups. Potentially, these groups are needed more than ever now with the impact of Covid on people and communities.

Poem by June, one of the group members of SODIT





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