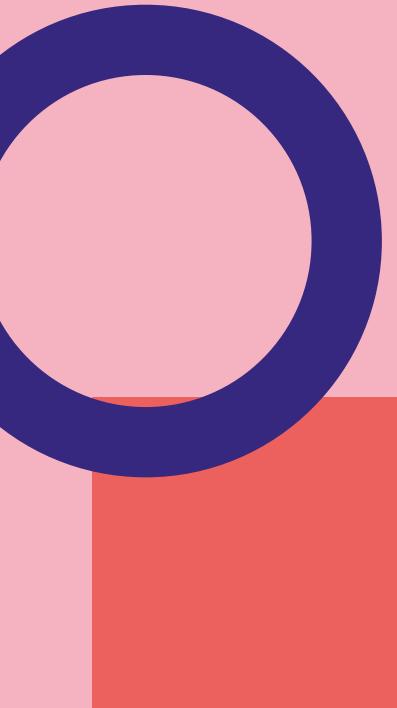




what
matters
to **you**

Community-led grantmaking lessons from our WM2U experience



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Introduction

The Make It Happen Fund (MIHF) was developed to enable grassroot communities to design and deliver local grantmaking processes that are genuinely led by the community.

The fund empowers community members to decide how small grants are distributed in their area: supporting local action, strengthening relationships, and building capabilities at the grassroots level.

In each area, MIHF brings together a local panel of volunteer community members, including parents, carers, and young people (where possible), to design, implement, and make decisions on the community grant fund. These panels have been supported by key practitioners:

- ▶ The What Matters to You (WM2U) Coordinator,
- ▶ The Corra Foundation Grant Advisor, and
- ▶ The local authority community practitioners.

Together, these practitioners ensure that community decision-making is well facilitated, transparent, and influential. This report outlines what it takes to deliver community-led grantmaking, and the expertise and infrastructure required to make it work well. It highlights the essential contribution of coordination, facilitation, and grant management in supporting local authorities to deliver this work successfully.



Who makes it happen: The people and partnerships behind the MIHF

Community-led grantmaking relies on several clearly defined roles and partnerships.

In the MIHF, these roles were delivered through a partnership between WM2U, Corra Foundation, and local authorities. In other places, the same functions could be delivered by different organisations, teams or individuals, provided the core responsibilities are in place.

Three interconnected strands of work make this approach effective:



1 Local coordination and facilitation capacity

Responsible for engaging communities, convening and supporting panels, and ensuring processes are accessible and inclusive.



2 Grantmaking and compliance expertise

Providing robust systems for due diligence, payments, reporting and assurance.



3 Strong local partnerships

Embedding the fund within existing community networks and aligning it with local priorities, often through local authority or third sector involvement.

This shared model allows community members to shape decisions in ways that feel authentic and relevant to their area, based on their strong understanding of local circumstances, while practitioners provide the structure, training, and due diligence required to manage the funds responsibly.

The local coordination and facilitation role

A dedicated local coordination and facilitation role is critical to the success of community-led grantmaking.

In the MIHF, this role was fulfilled by WM2U coordinators working closely with local authority community practitioners. Elsewhere, this function could be carried out by local authority staff, third sector organisations, or trusted community-based partners.

This local coordination and facilitation role typically involves:



Leading on the open recruitment of panel members with a particular emphasis on encouraging community members with no experience in local decision-making to attend.



Coordinating local publicity and information sessions, creating welcoming spaces where potential applicants can ask questions and build confidence.



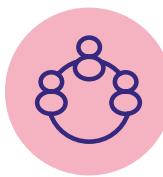
Supporting community panel members to reach grassroots groups who may not usually apply for funding.



Facilitating decision-making meetings and organising celebration or networking events that bring panel members and funded groups together.



Ensuring application processes remain accessible through multiple formats (e.g. paper-based and online).



Acting as a trusted bridge between community members, panel volunteers, and professional partners, helping to maintain trust, clarity and momentum throughout the process.

The role of grant management and assurance

Community-led grantmaking also requires access to specialist grant management and assurance expertise.

In the MIHF, this function was delivered by a grant advisor from Corra Foundation. In other contexts, a similar role could be provided by an independent grantmaker, intermediary organisation, or specialist team within a public body.

Process support and guidance

1. Design and guidance

This grant management function underpins each stage of the process, from design and training through to grant administration, payments and reporting.

Key elements include:

Project management guidance for each area, with detailed checklists to support criteria design and decision-making.

Provision of sample fund materials, such as information sheets and application forms, tailored for each panel to adapt.

Ongoing advice to ensure that each fund's design remains accessible, proportionate, and fair.

Quality assurance checks on materials, criteria, and processes to ensure consistency and compliance.

The grant management function also ensures that learning from one panel is captured and used to improve subsequent panels and funds, strengthening the overall programme model.

2. Training and capability building

Training sessions for each panel, co-led by the local coordinator and grant advisor, are needed to help panels build the skills and confidence to manage their own community fund. The local coordinator and grant advisor can share the responsibility of organising and leading training (approximately four sessions, each two to three hours long).

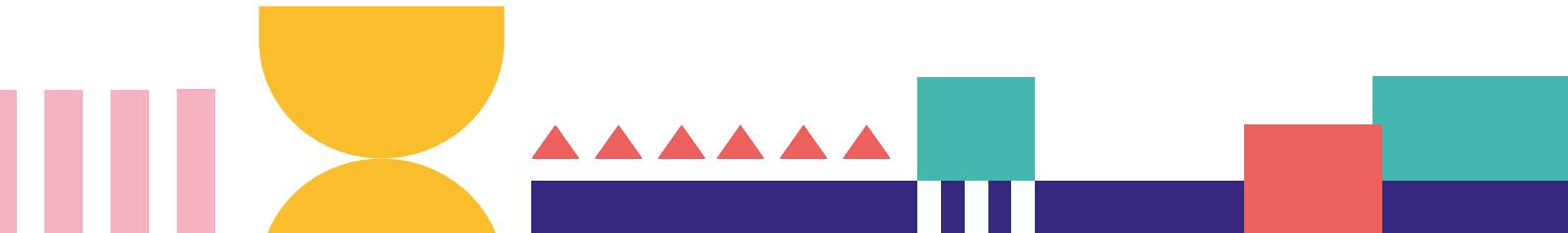
Training covers areas such as:

- ▶ Early exploration of shared values to shape how each panel want to work together, laying the groundwork for strong collaboration.
- ▶ Understanding grant making principles and processes.
- ▶ Developing fair and inclusive criteria.
- ▶ Assessing applications and making decisions collectively.
- ▶ Managing communication, confidentiality, and conflict within panels.

It is important that training explores the panels' local knowledge, as it plays a central role in shaping grant criteria and assessing applications, with panels using their understanding of community assets, gaps, and needs. Flexibility in training and support is also essential, enabling panels to feel confident and well-equipped to make fair, informed funding decisions that reflect local context. Therefore, the level of training and support required can vary in response to the needs and preferences of each local panel, and some panels might need additional training beyond the core programme.

These additional sessions can include:

- ▶ In-depth discussion around decision-making and helping panels agree consistent approaches, particularly where panel sizes are larger, or funding pots are smaller.
- ▶ Working collaboratively to interpret funder rules while maintaining a strong focus on voice-led projects, ensuring that children and young people's perspectives remain central.
- ▶ Wider capacity-building needs, including access to affordable spaces and varying levels of support for families and community members to lead activities.
- ▶ Building local capacity through workshops aimed at strengthening understanding of voice-led approaches and supporting sustainable, community-led activity.



3. Administration

The grant management and assurance function includes the following administrative work:



Setting up and maintaining grant records on a database.



Managing applicant information, distributing offer letters, and tracking payments.



Providing ongoing communication with grant recipients to ensure compliance and clarity.

Due to the panels' preference for paper-based applications, a large portion of the information is manually entered and verified to maintain data integrity.

4. Due diligence and payment processing

Grant management due diligence processes ensure that the funds are distributed responsibly, while remaining proportionate to the small-scale, grassroots nature of the fund.



For registered charities, the Grant Advisor conducts online due diligence checks before finalising grant offers.



For unregistered or emerging groups, the Grant Advisor supports them to identify a "buddy" organisation to hold funds on their behalf or verifies their bank account details directly.



Payment authorisations are carefully managed, with all relevant records attached to the grant system for accountability.

This work often requires patient communication and support, particularly for groups new to funding. For example, obtaining correct bank statements or buddy agreements can take several weeks of correspondence. The approach needs to prioritise encouragement, clarity, and support to help community groups complete the process successfully.

Insights and Learning

1. Managing practical realities and overcoming challenges

It is advised that the local coordination and grant management continuously refine the approach based on experience from each local panel. For example, early in the process, panels chose to focus on grassroots organisations rather than individuals, demonstrating the growing confidence and independence of community decision-makers. Lessons like these inform future design and training, ensuring that the model evolves with community needs. Community-led grantmaking requires flexibility, time, and a relational approach.

Key lessons include:

Working with volunteers

Community panel members are busy individuals who give their time freely. Schedules and deadlines must adapt to their availability.

Proportionate criteria

Panels must balance openness (to attract enough applications) with focus (to avoid being overwhelmed). Panels can find that over-subscribed funds can create a negative experience if too many strong applications must be declined.

Support for small groups

Many grassroots groups have limited experience of managing grants, which can slow down processes such as providing bank details or confirming arrangements for holding funds. In some cases, meeting payment conditions can take several weeks, requiring patient, supportive follow-up from grant administrators.

Pace and communication

Delays are often caused by incomplete documentation or lack of familiarity with funding processes. Consistent, supportive communication helps keep momentum and trust intact.

These challenges are important to the authenticity of community-led work. They are not inefficiencies, but reflections of what it takes to engage meaningfully with local groups that traditional funding approaches might miss.

2. Implications for local authorities and other public service bodies

Based on learning from the MIHF, the following conditions are essential for public bodies seeking to deliver meaningful community-led grantmaking.

Dedicated coordination capacity

To deliver community-led grantmaking effectively, local practitioners need sufficient dedicated time and capacity to coordinate panels, provide consistent communication and training, and manage applications. Without this protected resource, the relational and facilitative aspects of the model, which are essential to its success, can become fragmented.

Access to grant management expertise

Whether through an independent grantmaker or specialist internal team. However, maintaining or expanding a partnership with an experienced third-party grantmaker, can allow a local authority to benefit from established and specialist grantmaking systems, including due diligence, payment processes, compliance monitoring and reporting processes, while freeing community practitioners to focus on relationship-building and community empowerment. It is recognised this would require a financial investment in a relationship with an independent grantmaker.

Investment in participation and inclusion

A fund like the MIHF can align well with other participatory and community funds. Bringing each of these funding streams into clearer alignment can strengthen the overall participatory funding pot and help avoid duplication of effort across different teams and provide greater clarity and transparency to local communities.

Clarity about organisational location and accountability

A key question for a local authority or other public sector body is where a fund like the MIHF should sit organisationally. If the fund were to be fully managed within a council, there is a risk that administrative requirements and formal procedures could limit flexibility and responsiveness to community needs.

Flexibility in systems and timescales

Recognising that volunteer-led and grassroots activity does not always fit standard administrative timelines.

Strong local partnerships

It is important to embed the fund within the strengths of existing community partnerships, to allow the fund to align with local priorities, involve parents, carers and young people, and adapt processes to suit different life stages and availability.



Conclusion

The MIHF demonstrates that meaningful community-led grantmaking requires strong partnerships between community members, facilitators, and experienced grantmakers who bring both structure and flexibility to the process.

Through combined expertise, local panels can be supported to make informed, confident, and transparent funding decisions. The result is a process that empowers communities, strengthens local networks, and directs resources to where they will make the most difference.



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