Building Better Opportunities Evaluation

Annual Report June 2017

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1.0 Introduction

In January 2016, Ecorys was commissioned by the Big Lottery Fund (BLF) to undertake an evaluation and learning contract for the Building Better Opportunities (BBO) Programme. This first annual report covers activities undertaken up to the end of June 2017, centring on the results of scoping activities undertaken in the initial phase of the evaluation, the first wave of an online survey with grant holders and partners, and interviews with unsuccessful BBO grant applicants. The report also draws selectively from documentary analysis undertaken as part of a scoping review of the programme.

The findings in the report should be treated as indicative, and will be supplemented with further evidence later in 2017. This evidence will be gained from further data collection activities, alongside facilitated learning and networking activities with partnerships which will generate project level learning.

1.1 BBO programme overview

BLF is matching funds from the European Social Fund (ESF) programme 2014-2020 to provide joint investment in local projects tackling the root causes of poverty, promoting social inclusion and driving local jobs and growth, particularly for the hardest to reach groups. The BBO programme provides an opportunity to harness the BLF's experience in supporting local projects aiming to address social and economic inclusion. This has considerable potential to improve access to ESF and enhance impacts for harder to reach groups and, in doing so, address weaknesses identified in evaluations of ESF in previous programming periods.

BBO adopts a decentralised programme design, with 38 Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) being involved in designing project outlines to inform the development and delivery of the programme at local levels. These outlines have been used to allocate funds to interventions that address local priorities. BLF undertook awareness raising and promotional activities to encourage partnerships to respond to the project outlines by way of ensuring the programme could draw on a breadth of expertise, hence potentially maximising impacts. BBO has been designed to engage the expertise and knowledge of a wide range of stakeholders and thus create positive impacts for harder to reach groups.

Across the 38 LEPs who responded to the BBO opportunity, the process of allocating funds has been through advertisement and application to project outlines. Applications and funding decisions are initially being made across three rounds. A fourth round is also planned to address gaps or unfulfilled project outlines. Within each round there is a two stage assessment process:

1. Initial individual assessment is by BLF Funding Officers (FOs) using 13 assessment principles. Internal moderation is undertaken before applications go to a decision making panel.

2. Following approval at the first panel, applicants work up their application for a stage 2 assessment. Applicants had the opportunity in the 1st application form to request a grant to support this development of the application. The 2nd Stage assessment was also judgement based, using the same principles. A further decision making panel made the final decision to fund or not.

The application and assessment process for BBO is ongoing, with BLF expecting to fund around 130-140 projects at the end of the process.

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1.2 Evaluation aims

The purpose of the BBO evaluation contract is to:

- Identify what is working well and why (both in terms of engaging and supporting certain target groups of participants (beneficiaries) and in delivering in line with ESF rules). Part of this may involve considering what is not working well and why, in order to set out a robust and clear set of recommendations for future work; and
- Share these findings with all BBO grant holders, so they can use this learning to improve their own project delivery.

The evaluation primarily concentrates on examining the approach to programme implementation on the ground. In doing so it is taking a formative perspective to generate insights and timely lessons during the life of the programme. The aim is that this will, in turn, help to maximise participation by particular target groups and enhance impacts. The evaluation will analyse progress in facilitating access to ESF for VCSE organisations, especially those with specific experience in working with harder to reach groups, and capture achievements to date in building capacity to engage with employers to create appropriate pathways to work. It will also examine the type and range of interventions that are being supported, as well as their effects or impacts on bringing participants closer to or into the labour market.

The broad areas for investigation and analysis through the national evaluation are considered briefly below under the headings access, impact and learning.

- With regard to **access**, the evaluation will explore progress to date in opening up ESF funding, via BBO, to VCSE organisations that are well-placed to deliver effective interventions for harder to reach target groups.
- The evaluation will conduct a range of activities to examine the **impacts** of the programme, including project reviews on a sample basis (i.e. a 'deep and narrow' analysis) to provide detailed and insightful findings about what works and for whom, particularly in areas where there is a current paucity of evidence.
- The above evaluation work will be coupled with a strong emphasis on sharing **learning** through a programme of learning activities. Specifically these will be designed to identify critical success factors and lessons for the Fund and delivery organisations.

Building on the above, an evaluation framework was developed and refined following the evaluation scoping stage. The research questions presented overleaf are the current focus of the evaluation against which emerging findings are presented in this report. Further details of the specific methodologies pursued to date then follows. The full evaluation framework is available in Annex A.

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Table 1.1 Evaluation questions and link to main research tasks

Topics for investigation	Evaluation questions
Access and barriers	• What are the characteristics of delivery partners? • How far as the fund been effective in securing involvement from VCSE organisations with particular specialist experience of working with the hardest to reach groups? • What are the perceived barriers to participation and how have these been addressed by the Fund and by partners? • What the lessons to date for facilitating access to widen participation amongst organisations with no or limited experience of ESF?
Working with ESF	• What are the issues that partnerships have faced in improving their understanding and experience of working with ESF? • What challenges and risks have been identified and how successfully have these been addressed? • What are the lessons to date on managing the use of ESF during project implementation?
Partnership arrangements	• What is the nature of partnerships that have been formed to access the BBO programme? • To what extent are these proposed partnership arrangements in applications being delivered in practice? • How effectively is the programme reaching organisations that are new to ESF and stimulating new partnership arrangements? What are the critical success factors in mobilising new partnerships? • How far do partnerships reflect the focus of the programme on harder to reach groups? • What are the lessons to date for partnership formation and working?

1.3   Evaluation methodology

The BBO evaluation and learning contract is being pursued through a number of strands of work.   The following provides an overview of the key evaluation activities and the progress made with each of these tasks to date.

1.3.1   Scoping stage

The scoping stage of the evaluation was conducted in the first half of 2016 and had several aims. In summary these were:

- to help plan and design the evaluation, in consultation with BLF;
- to determine the main thematic issues of the programme; and
- involving stakeholders in the design of the evaluation to ensure it is fit for purpose, does not cause unnecessary burden and is bought into by all stakeholders.

A number of tasks were undertaken:

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- **Consultations with key stakeholders**. Seven interviews were undertaken, complimented by other informal conversations. Those involved included BLF policy and operational staff involved with the BBO programme, LEP representatives and key contacts from the BBO support programme.[1] The purpose of the consultations was to:
    - ► Gain an understanding of programme development, key issues, priorities, challenges and risks
    - ► Help prioritise key thematic areas for the evaluation (target groups, intervention types, cross cutting themes, etc.)
    - ► Explore barriers and enablers to getting projects and stakeholders engaged in the evaluation.

- A desk based **review of key documentation and data**. This involved the extraction of information from project outlines and project applications received to date to compile a project database. The database facilitated some initial analysis of the projects being funded under BBO in terms of their thematic focus, target groups and partnership approaches.

- Establishment of an **evaluation steering group.** The purpose of the evaluation steering group is to contribute to the design and delivery of the evaluation programme. It also serves as an opportunity to raise awareness of the findings from the evaluation and gain insight into the relevance of findings to current issues for projects and the wider sector. To date, three meetings of the Steering Group have been held: in May 2016, October 2016 and January 2017.

1.3.2   Evaluating access

Data collection to date has focused on this part of the evaluation which aims to understand how successful the BBO programme has been in widening access to European funding for supported VCSE organisations. It also aims to highlight and share experiences from those BBO grant holders who are the most successful in managing ESF requirements and rules. Two main tasks have been pursued to date:

1.3.2.1   *Unsuccessful applicant interviews*

The aim of these interviews was to help inform how effective the programme has been in widening access to ESF funding, and how this could be enhanced, by gathering direct feedback from organisations that were not successful. Specifically the interviews sought reflections on the application process as well as other factors perceived to have resulted in the unsuccessful decision. In total, 15 interviews were completed between September and October 2016. These included 11 interviews with organisations who were not successful at Stage 1 and four of those unsuccessful at Stage 2 of the application process. The selection of organisations to interview involved purposive sampling to ensure different types, sizes and locations of organisations were consulted. In addition a focus group was conducted with BLF funding officers, who had direct experience of the application process. This enabled the evaluation to also capture the perceptions of BLF staff on the challenges applicants may have experienced.

1.3.2.2   *Grant holder survey*

An online survey of grant holders and their partners was implemented in early 2017. The purpose of the survey was to gather additional profiling information on BBO partnerships along with information on their knowledge of ESF requirements and current learning issues. The themes covered in the 15 minute survey were:

- Profiles of the partnerships and organisations involved in the BBO programme to build on information provided in application forms.

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[1] RSM, in partnership with Ecorys UK, provides support to potential applicants, applicants and grant holders of BBO.

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- Organisations' previous experience of EU, and specifically ESF, funding to assess the extent to which BBO has increased access to EU funding.
- Perceptions of organisations' capacity and knowledge concerning ESF requirements to identify areas for programme learning and support.
- Feedback and perceptions on the application process for BBO.

Following the scoping stage, a decision was made to widen participation in the survey to include partner as well as lead organisations. BLF provided a contact database for all lead organisations that were successful in rounds one and two of decision making. A data capture exercise was conducted to gather direct contact details for partners. Distribution of invitations to participate in the survey took place over two waves between February and April 2017. To date 271 respondents have engaged with the survey, including 27% who were lead organisations and 74% who were partner organisations[2].

1.4   Structure of the report

This report represents the early findings from the initial evaluation tasks. The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 examines the issue of access and barriers, presenting initial evidence on the extent to which BBO has widened access to ESF amongst VCSE organisations.
- Chapter 3 looks at the issue of access in relation to delivery organisations' experience of working with ESF.
- Chapter 4 presents early findings on the partnership arrangements involved in the BBO programme.
- Finally, in Chapter 5 we provide some concluding thoughts and areas for focus for the next phase of the evaluation.

1.5   Interpreting the data

It should also be noted that, in the analysis that follows, figures relating to survey data in some tables and charts may not sum to 100%, due to multiple responses being possible or rounding. In presenting the analysis, figures are rounded to the nearest whole percentage point (including to "0" if less than 0.5%) with "-" representing any responses that were not endorsed at all. In places, the survey responses made by individual respondents to open questions are presented as verbatim quotes to illustrate the points or results being presented.

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[2] Total does not add to 100% as one organisation considered themselves both a lead and a partner

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2.0 Access and Barriers

A key strand of the early evaluation work aimed to examine whether, via BBO, ESF funding has been opened up to organisations that are well-placed to deliver effective interventions for harder to reach target groups. This section outlines emerging findings on this theme by examining the types of organisation that have successfully taken up the BBO investment opportunity (section 2.1) and the barriers and enablers that can be identified as having played a role (section 2.2), including specific feedback that has been gathered on the application process for BBO.

2.1 Characteristics of delivery partners

This section provides initial findings on the profile of organisations involved in the BBO programme, covering both lead organisations and partners. It draws on data from the application document review and the initial findings from the grant holder and partner survey.

2.1.1 Type of organisation

All those responding to the grant holder survey were asked to provide further information on the type of organisation they were, covering sector, status and geographical coverage.

Table 2.1 shows the broad sector type respondents felt best represented their organisation among the total sample of 271 organisations, as well as presenting a breakdown of lead and partner organisations. Most organisations responding to the survey were charities (68%) with just over a tenth being either community interest companies or social enterprises (11%). A smaller proportion were a company in the private sector (5%), a further 5% were local authorities; with 4% being Further or Higher Education Institutions (excluding Universities) and 1% were Universities.

Table 2.1: Sector of BBO organisations

	% of organisations		
	Total	Lead	Partner
Charity	68	57	71
Community Interest Company/Social Enterprise	11	11	12
Company/private sector	5	8	4
Public Sector – Local Authority	5	6	4
Further or higher education	4	3	4
University	1	1	0
Other	7	14	3
Base:	*271*	*72*	*201*

Source: Grant holder survey, single response question

Drawing on the unsuccessful applicant interviews, there was an isolated view from unsuccessful applicants that, in some locations, there is an uneven distribution of organisations by sector, and that there not been a 'level playing field' in the application process because VCSE organisations had been competing with Local Authorities. The results in Table 2.1 do not suggest this given the profile as a whole, but further analysis will be undertaken to explore the sectoral dimension of BBO partnerships across different locations.

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The following chart shows the proportion of survey respondents that stated their organisation was independent and those stating it was a branch or department of a larger organisation.

Figure 2.1: Whether independent or not
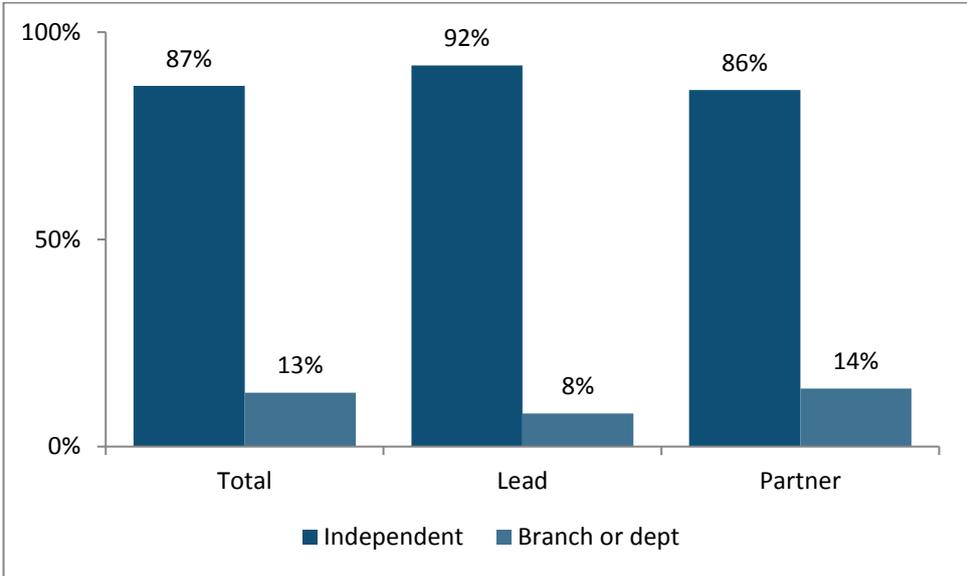
Base (total sample): Total (271), Lead (72), Partner (201), single response question

Out of all organisations, 87% were independent with the remaining 13% being a branch or department of a larger organisation. Similar proportions were seen in terms of whether organisations were a lead (92% independent; 8% branch) or partner (86% lead; 14% branch) organisation.

Looking at the geographical level that organisations operated at (Table 2.2), most organisations reported either working locally (50%) or regionally (41%), with around one in seven (14%) working across several regions or throughout England. There was no major difference in results according to whether the organisation was a lead or partner organisation.

Table 2.2: Geographical level of organisation

	% of organisations		
	Total	Lead	Partner
Nationally (i.e. across several regions or throughout England)	14	21	11
Regionally (i.e. across several local authority areas within the same region)	41	54	36
Locally (i.e. within specific wards or mostly within a single local authority area)	50	32	56
Other	3	7	2
Base:	*271*	*72*	*201*

Source: Grant holder survey, multiple response question

Although based on small sample sizes, the emerging evidence from this data (supplemented with qualitative feedback) is that locally based independent organisations are highly represented in BBO delivery. Further analysis is needed, but this suggests that on the basis of the initial evidence available that specialist VCSE organisations are successfully accessing BBO.

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2.1.2 Working with "hard-to-reach" groups

All organisations participating in the survey were asked to state which target groups their project intended to work with, with this being shown in the 'any target group' column of data in table 2.3. It is worth noting that where there were responses from organisations within the same overall project, these were not necessarily always similar (i.e. some organisations identified target groups that others had not and vice versa).[3] This may be due to different partners having different levels of knowledge around the overall project aims and focus, and/or knowledge of the presence of partners engaged in project activity to specifically support particular target groups.

In total, large proportions of organisations stated they were targeting people who were out of contact with the labour market (76%), with low or no skills (75%) and people with health issues and disabilities (70%). Around two-thirds were targeting people who experience mental health issues (68%), with slightly lower proportions targeting women (62%), lone parents not in employment (61%), people aged over 50 and not in employment (58%) and people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups (58%). Around half, or slightly less than half, noted that they would be targeting various other specific groups.

Table 2.3: Overall and top three target groups for BBO organisations

	% of organisations	
	Any target group	Main target groups
Those out of contact with the labour market	76	49
People with low or no skills	75	39
People with health issues and disabilities	70	27
People who experience mental health issues	68	27
Women	62	12
Lone parents not in employment	61	10
People aged over 50 and not in employment	58	17
People from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups	58	7
People with parental or carer responsibilities	52	5
Ex-offenders and offenders	48	6
Young people	46	24
Low-income, single-earner households with children where one partner is not working	44	5
Individuals with substance abuse/misuse/addiction issues	44	3
Homeless people	42	4
Refugees and recent migrants	35	3
Other	11	10
Base (all answering question)	*(271)*	*(268)*

Source: Grant holder survey, multiple response question

[3] For example, one overall project provided responses from seven different organisations. Of the 14 listed targets, three were mentioned as overall targets five times, four mentioned four times, three mentioned three times, three mentioned twice and three one time

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The right hand column of the above table shows the results when organisations were asked to state their principal target groups (up to a maximum of three). When asked to note the top three groups that they would be targeting, there tended to be the same general ranking of categories as for the overall targeting. Just under half (49%) said they would have those out of contact with the labour market as one of their main targets, 39% people with low or no skills and just over a quarter (27%) people with health issues and disabilities and 27% with mental health issues with most other options noted by under a fifth of organisations. The one notable exception to the pattern related to targeting young people – while a relatively low proportion of organisations (46%) said they would target them at all, 24% said they would be one of their main three targets, therefore making this a niche sub-group of particular relevance.

Data on the overall number of target groups was analysed in more detail to provide an overview of the number of different target groups noted by each organisation, with this information shown in the following table at a total level:

Table 2.4: Number of target groups

	% of organisations
1	13
2-4	13
5-9	25
10-14	39
15 or more	10
Base:	*271*

Source: Grant holder survey, multiple response question. Results include each "other" option as a separate response

This data shows that there is a relatively wide spread in terms of the extent that organisations are targeting specific groups. Just over a tenth (13%) were only targeting one specific group, with the same proportion targeting between two and four, with exactly a quarter targeting five to nine. Almost half of all respondents had a large number of target groups, with 39% targeting ten to fourteen and exactly a tenth targeting 15 or more. As noted earlier, discrepancies across partner organisations in terms of which groups were being targeted may have an impact on these results – if certain organisations are not aware of target groups this data is likely to overstate the number of organisations in a partnership with a small number of targets.

This data together with analysis of the project applications provides a simple picture of the targeting in BBO, where the following types of project are evident:

- Type 1 - Broad based intervention delivered through a partnership model, with a wide-ranging focus on target groups and needs and delivered through a wide partnership to cover geography and/or needs.
- Type 2 - Specialist model – narrow focus on specific target group or theme delivering specialist or targeted intervention utilising appropriate specialist partners.

Subsequent evaluation and learning activity will seek to explore this in more depth, exploring what works well across these two broad models and what works in respect of specific target groups.

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2.2 Facilitating access

The following sections consider the issue of access through examining various aspects of the BBO programme, including the design and operation of the application process and the additional support mechanisms in place.

2.2.1 The application process

The process of allocating BBO funds has been through advertisement and application to project outlines which were developed by BLF in conjunction with LEPs. There was a two stage application process. Stage one was fully open and competitive, requiring completion of an application form. From this a shortlist of applicants were selected to go forward to stage two. Stage two required applicants to further develop their project plans. The two stage application process was considered by BLF as necessary to enable the filtering of applicants; however, an invitation to stage two did not guarantee that the project concerned would be funded.

Early results from the survey of grant holders and partners suggested that a partnership approach was generally taken to the preparation of BBO applications. Organisations were asked to state which ways they were involved in the BBO application process or bid, using a list of predefined options (Table 2.4). Most organisations (86%) had been involved in the BBO application process through attending partnership meetings or briefings, with just over three-quarters (80%) having supplied organisational information or documentation, and 62% having provided written contributions to bids. Just over half (55%) held telephone discussions with lead or other partners. Looking at the results of partners as opposed to lead organisations specifically, it appears that an active contribution was made by the majority of partners, particularly in attending partnership meetings (88%), supplying organisational information (82%) and providing written contributions to bids (59%).

Table 2.4: Ways organisations were involved in BBO application process

	% of organisations		
	Total	Lead	Partner
Attended partnership meetings/briefings	86	83	88
Supplied organisational information/documentation	80	74	82
Provided written contributions to bids	62	71	59
Held telephone discussions with lead or other partners	55	67	52
No active contribution required	4	3	4
No answers as not in post	4	8	2
Other	7	15	5
Base:	*271*	*72*	*201*

Source: Grant holder survey, multiple response question

The above, together with later information on partnership working (see section 4.5), suggests that the foundation for genuine partnership work was evident at the application stage in many cases. Further examination of the partnership aspect of BBO is presented in Section 4.0.

Looking at the application process as a whole, those who responded to the grant holder survey were asked to state on a scale of 1 to 5 (where 5 was easiest and 1 most difficult) how easy they found the BBO application process (Figure 2.2). Results were relatively polarised, around a third of organisations had found it reasonably easy, with 5% giving a score of 5 and 31% a score of 4. Four in ten (40%) found it neither

easy nor difficult (as score of 3); with 22% giving a score of 2 and 2% saying it was most difficult. There was no notable difference in these results in terms of whether the organisation was a lead or partner. Of the 51 respondents who found the application process difficult (a score of 1 or 2 on the above scale), a notable proportion had applied for funding before. In total, 75% had applied for ESF previously, 76% for ERDF and 84% to another EU funder.

Figure 2.2: Ease/difficulty of application process
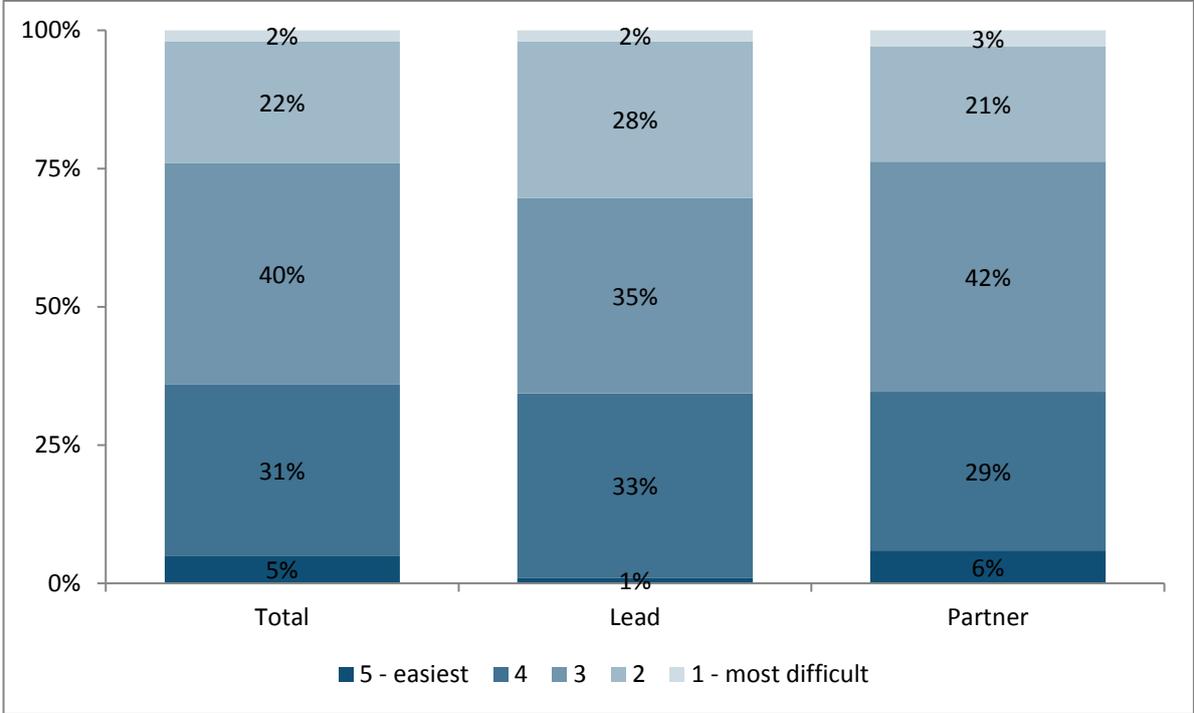
Base (giving answer): Total (209), Lead (60), Partner (151), single response question

A list of statements about the application process were also provided in the survey, with organisations asked to state how much they agreed or disagreed with each (Table 2.5). Results exclude respondents who did not know or had not been involved at this stage. Around six out of every ten or more respondents felt that the level of data required for the initial application was proportionate (66%), that the two stage application process was proportionate (64%) and that the BBO application process was a positive experience (60%). Specifically, feedback captured from applicants included that the application form had been *'quite straightforward'* and *'easy to understand'*.

A smaller proportion felt that the total application process was completed in a reasonable length of time (43%). On this latter point, a perception from programme stakeholders was that the two stage application process was considered necessary to enable the filtering of applicants; however, some criticism was received from applicants around the length of the process and the level of commitment required from an applicant as a result.

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Table 2.5: Strongly agreed or agreed with each statement

	% of organisations	
	Total	*Base (giving answer)*
The level of detail required for the initial application was proportionate	66	*(219)*
The two stage application process was proportionate	64	*(222)*
The BBO application process was a positive experience	60	*(232)*
The total application process was completed in a reasonable length of time	43	*(235)*

Source: Grant holder survey, single response question

Organisations that responded to the survey were asked to state the key challenges they had in terms of their involvement in the partnership/application process so far. A range of different challenges were noted as free text responses by respondents. These were then coded to reveal the main ones mentioned being the time required and/or timescales involved (26%), the number of partners/cooperation required (17%), bureaucracy (15%), changes to guidance, procedure or policy (14%), and understanding the ESF rules (14%). Setting up the project/process/project planning/management (11%) was the only other suggestion made by more than a tenth of the sample.

Table 2.6: Challenges in partnership/application process

	% of organisations		
	Total	Lead	Partner
Time required / timescales	26	25	26
Number of partners/cooperation	17	17	16
Bureaucracy / paperwork	15	8	17
Changes to guidance / procedure / policy	14	19	13
Understanding the EFS rules / requirements / guidance	14	17	12
Setting up project / process / project planning / management	11	15	9
Understanding the financial requirements / finance	8	6	9
Required evidence / eligibility	6	3	7
Other	3	4	2
None	19	21	18
Base:	*271*	*72*	*201*

Source: Grant holder survey, multiple response question

Several of these issues also emerged from the interviews with unsuccessful applicants. There was a perception that there were last minute changes in the 'rules' around the BBO programme that affected the application process. This related to only being made aware that only one application was going to be accepted for each of the strands being commissioned at the final briefing, as well as several changes to the programme guidance and/or application form once the application process was live. According to one unsuccessful applicant, the '*goal posts kept moving in the lead up to the bid'*, and *'further clarifications had been provided at a very late stage in the application process'.* One other organisation responding to the survey commented:

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BLF programme stakeholders recognised this situation and acknowledge that it was not ideal, but that some changes resulted from clarifications or finalisation of aspects by the Managing Authority (MA), which it was felt necessary to pass on to applicants as it could change their decision to participate in the programme. As an example, it was noted by programme stakeholders that rules around indirect costs had been changed and that, in respect of the guidance, *"…the detail wasn't there to start with."* Funding officers commented that challenges in this respect tended to reduce between the rounds due to lessons learned, the guidance from the MA being more developed and hence officers being able to provide more certain advice, and the ability in round three to hold an event for bidders where some of the common issues that arose in the previous rounds could be discussed.

One other issue that emerged through the unsuccessful applicant interviews was a view that that there had been some ambiguities around the volume of learner outcomes that the programme was looking for. For example, one applicant suggested that other co-financing organisations usually specify, *'what and how many outcomes they are looking for'*. While the minimum numbers had been stated for BBO, there was no maximum. This approach, according to this applicant concerned, had made the *'bidding platform uneven'*, with a perception that larger organisations would be able to offer higher numbers and thus score better in the assessment process. The judgement based assessment process used in the BBO programme did not, however, reflect this and programme stakeholders did not perceive that this happened in practice.

BLF programme stakeholders also recognised that initial communications to applicants sought to give reassurance that the initial application was simple. However, in reality, to allow BLF to make robust decisions, a greater level of detail was required. It was noted that the use of the judgment based assessment, on reflection, resulted in a considerable amount of work by the decision making panels to ensure they were familiar with individual applications in order to make robust decisions following funding officer recommendations. The programme was felt to have benefited from a proactive panel that had the ability and good will to take on the required level of preparation; without this it was noted that the approach taken could have proved problematic in terms of the significant level of engagement and time required on the part of the decision panel.

2.2.2   Support and assistance

Alongside the application process, BLF provided various support mechanisms to provide assistance to potential applicants. BLF Funding Officers were available to provide direct support to applicants during stage two. During stage one, given competition rules associated with ESF funding, funding officers were limited in the communication they could have with applicants.

In addition a specific support contract was awarded to an external organisation to support potential applicants and grant holders to understand, plan for and deliver the additional requirements that come with managing European funding. A BBO ESF Support website provides relevant support materials appropriate to each stage of the programme including guidance notes, templates and example documents and good practice. A helpline is also available for potential applicants to discuss any specific queries.

The final aspect of support was the availability of funding of up to £50,000 to help with developing detailed project plans during stage two of the application process. This funding was in addition to the amount available for the project and is not subject to ESF rules.

The evaluation to date has explored the different support mechanisms outlined above. A range of questions were asked of lead organisations in the grant holder survey relating to any assistance they might have

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accessed in completing their application. A large majority (93%) of lead organisations had taken the opportunity to receive development funding during stage 2 of the application process. Respondents were not asked directly to rate this aspect of the BBO Programme support but through open questions one respondent commented that "*the development funding was very useful*".

In total, slightly over half (56%) of the 72 lead organisations who responded to the survey said that they had accessed other external assistance during the BBO application process. Those who had accessed assistance were asked the source of assistance. From the 40 asked, 65% had help from a BLF Funding Officer, 40% from the BBO ESF Support Contract and 68% from another source. Among the others were fourteen mentions of consultants, four of lawyers or legal advice, four bid writers, two accountants and eight others.

Those who had used a certain source of assistance were asked to state how helpful the support they accessed was on a scale from 1 (very helpful) to 5 (not at all helpful). The results are outlined below which suggests mixed views of the different sources of assistance. Given the small number of responses on which this is based, significant caution is required when drawing conclusions:

- Out of the 26 with support from a BLF Funding Officer, 17 gave a score of 1 (very helpful), 3 a score of 2, 4 a score of 3 and one a score of 4 (not very helpful)

- Out of the 16 with support from a BBO ESF Support Contract organisation, one gave a score of 1 (very helpful), 6 a score of 2, 7 a score of 3 and 2 a score of 4 (not very helpful)

- Out of the 27 with support from an "other" organisation, 18 gave a score of 1 (very helpful), 5 a score of 2, 2 a score of 3 and 1 a score of 4 (not very helpful)

One theme that emerged around the support available from, and given by, funding officers was the perception that BBO applicants had less opportunity to receive support in stage one of the application process. At this stage the funding officers noted that they could not go back to applicants to offer advice; this was only possible in cases of incomplete information. It was noted that some applicants found this surprising relative to other BLF programmes where there was more direct support from the start of the application process and more developmental dialogue.

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3.0 Working with ESF

This chapter examines the issue of access in relation to delivery organisations' experience of working with ESF. At this stage, the findings presented draw largely on the responses to the grant holder survey. These results serve as a baseline of organisations' knowledge and experience of ESF (Section 3.1) and early challenges (Section 3.2). Revisiting these themes throughout the evaluation will allow for assessment of whether organisational capability has been enhanced and, therefore, whether potential access to other complex funding programmes is increasing.

3.1 Level of ESF knowledge and experience

Organisations were asked to state whether they had applied for EU funding before the BBO opportunity. This was asked both in terms of whether respondents had applied for funding and whether it had been received, by way of exploring their previous experience of EU funding.

Figure 3.1 below shows the total proportion of those responding (271 organisations) who had applied for any EU funding from the ESF, ERDF or other sources.[4] About three-quarters (74%) of organisations had applied for ESF. A quarter (25%) had applied to the ERDF and 61% had applied to other EU funding sources.

**Figure 3.1: Whether organisations had previously applied for EU funding**
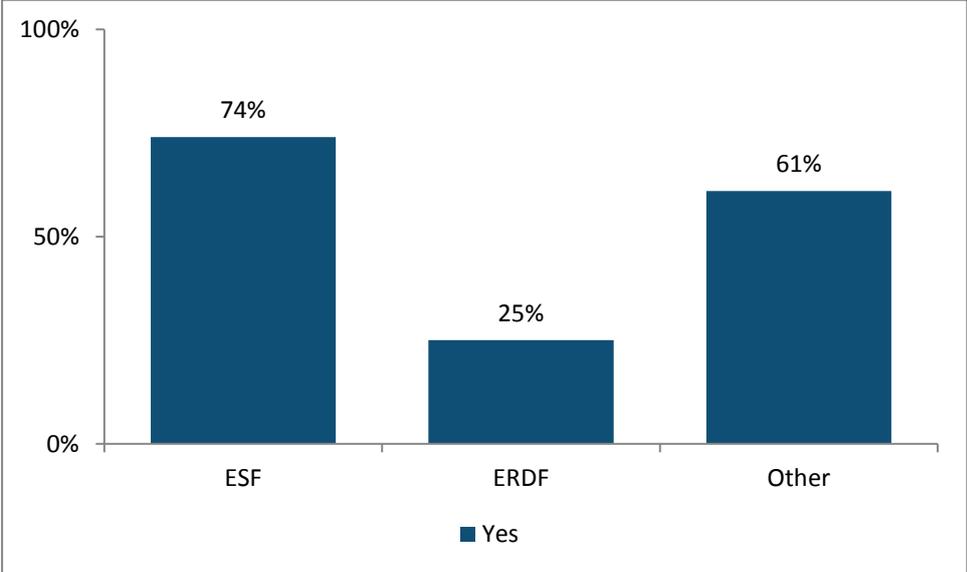
Base (total sample): 271, multiple response question

[4] Any respondents who did not provide an answer for any source of funding (i.e. ESF, ERDF or other) were assumed not to have applied.

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Results show that the vast majority of those who had applied for the various types of EU funding went on to receive it (at least once), with 69% receiving ESF funding, 24% ERDF and 41% other funding[5] (Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2: Whether organisations had previously received EU funding
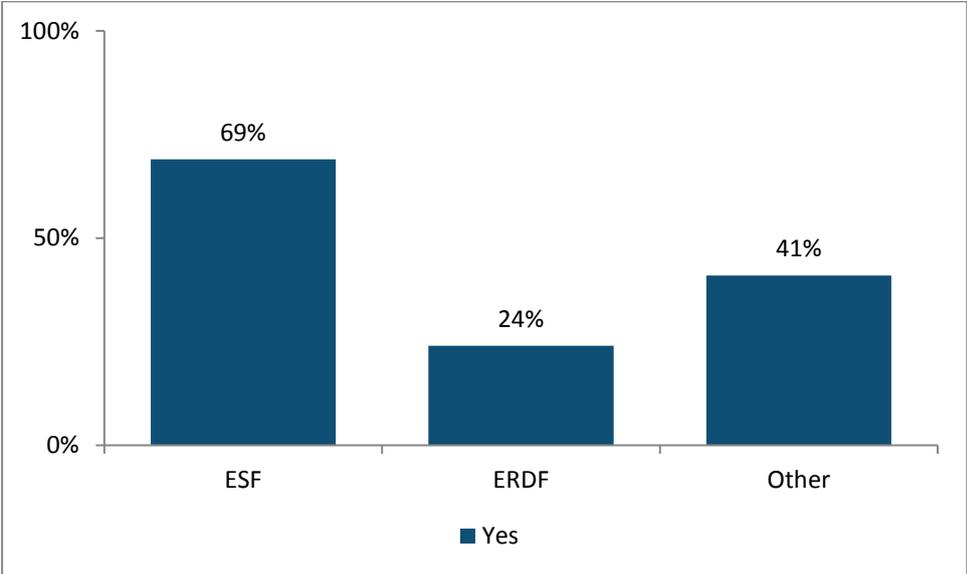
Base (total sample): 271, multiple response question

The above findings suggest that there was a relatively broad level of experience amongst BBO delivery organisations in terms of applications and receipt of EU funding prior to applying for a BBO grant. Some caution is needed here as while the question asked about organisational experience, it is likely that for some this may have been answered from the perspective of individual respondents. In addition, respondents were not asked how recent this experience of applying for or receiving funding was, or the nature of the programme under which they previously applied.

There is also a proportion of the cohort of BBO delivery organisations (around 26%) that responded to the survey for whom BBO is their first exposure to receiving ESF funding. As such, this is evidence that access to ESF funding may have been facilitated for some organisations for the first time through the BBO programme. From individual comments made by these organisations, there is a suggestion that the focus and aims of the BBO programme proved a better match than previous ESF opportunities for some organisations:

> *"This is the first time the opportunities have directly fitted with our social purpose as an organisation"*
> *[Lead organisation]*

More broadly, programme stakeholders noted that those writing the BBO applications, who had knowledge of ESF, may cease to be involved when projects moved into their delivery phase. The specific role organisations played in previous projects, and how involved they were in delivery, is also not possible to ascertain from these responses alone. To assess this, organisations were asked to state how

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[5] Results for having received "other" funding are slightly higher than those having applied for it, presumably due either to the respondent mis-recording information or a respondent having received funding without feeling that they had technically applied for it (e.g. joining a partnership after the application stage)

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knowledgeable, prior to applying to BBO, their organisation was about ESF requirements overall (Figure 3.3). Almost two-thirds of all organisations (64%) said they were knowledgeable about ESF requirements before applying to BBO, 25% being 'very knowledgeable' and 39% 'knowledgeable'. Most of the remainder felt they were aware but did not know much detail (31%), with 6% saying they were not at all knowledgeable.

Figure 3.3: Prior knowledge of ESF funding requirements
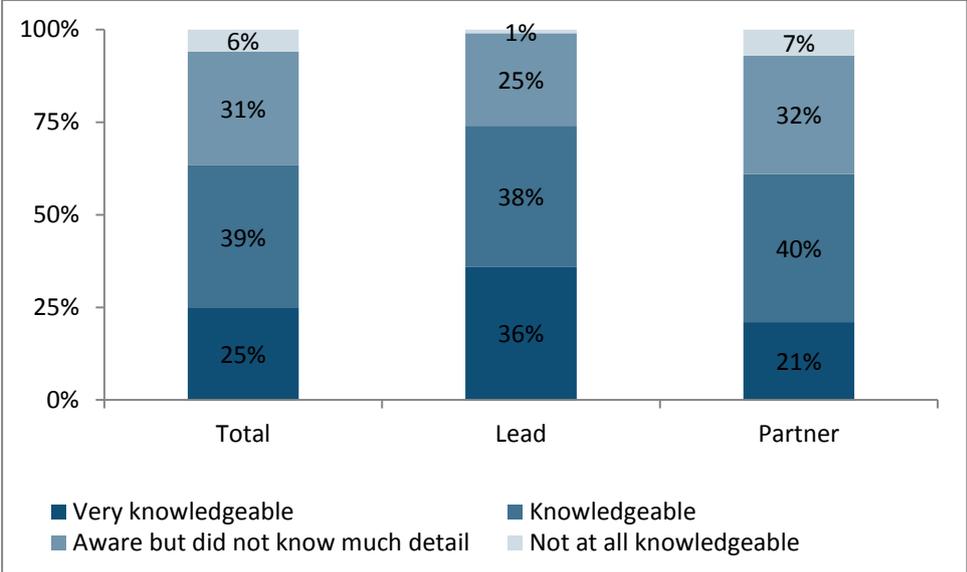
Base (total sample): Total (271), Lead (72), Partner (201), single response question

While requirements in respect of different ESF programmes will vary, there is evidence that BBO delivery organisations in general possess a core of ESF knowledge. Looking at this in relation to previous experience of applying to ESF, it suggests (Table 3.1) that previous experience is a key factor in the level of knowledge reported.

Table 3.1: Prior knowledge of ESF funding and whether applied previously

	% of organisations		
	Total	Previously applied for ESF funds	Not previously applied for ESF funds
Very knowledgeable/ knowledgeable	64	75	32
Aware but not much detail/ not at all knowledgeable	36	25	68
Base:	*271*	*200*	*71*

Source: Grant holder survey, single response question

As seen earlier, 64% of the total sample was 'very knowledgeable' or 'knowledgeable' about ESF funding requirements prior to their application. This increased to 75% of those who had previously applied for ESF funding, although a quarter (25%) of those who stated they had previously applied said they were now either aware but without much detail, or not at all knowledgeable about requirements. As noted, this may reflect the changing nature of ESF requirements between programming periods and across different ESF programmes. Among those who had not applied previously, around a third (32%) said they were very knowledgeable or knowledgeable about requirements, with the remaining proportion (68%) having lower levels of awareness. Further evaluation work will seek to assess how and in what ways organisational capacity and knowledge changes through BBO.

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All organisations were also asked to state on a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 is low and 5 is high) how they would rate their organisational knowledge and capacity for various aspects of the ESF requirements at the point of applying to BBO (Figure 3.4).

Figure 3.4: Organisational knowledge at application stage
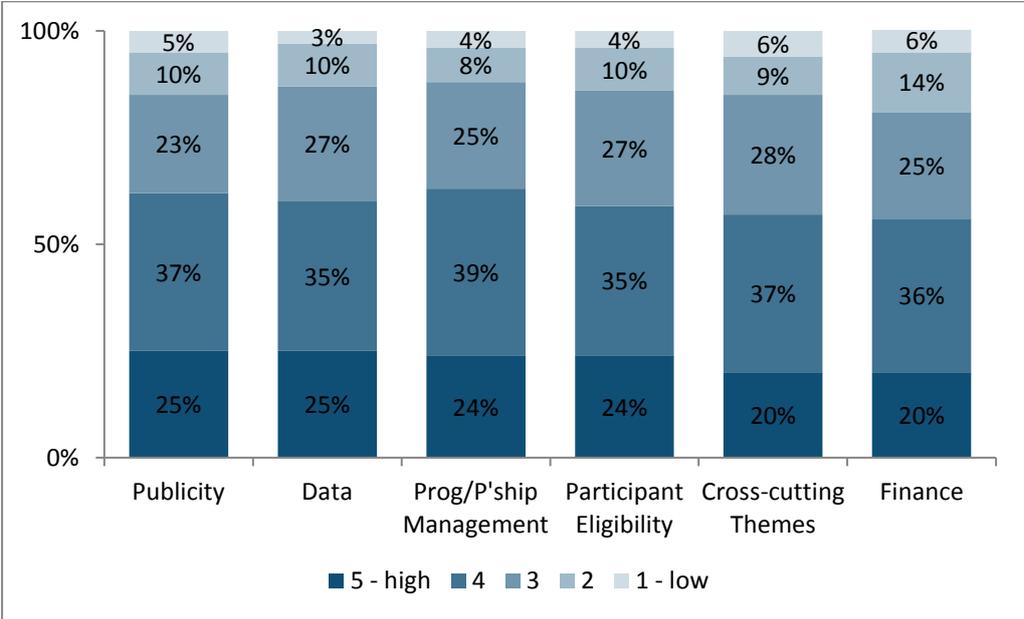
Base (total sample): 271, single response question for each option

As the chart demonstrates, in general, organisations said they had a reasonable amount of knowledge of each of the various aspects relevant to the application stage, with between 55% (finance) and 63% (programme and partnership management) rating their knowledge as either a 4 or a 5 across the categories considered. A notable minority gave lower scores, with the proportion giving one of the bottom two scores (1 or 2) being 19% for finance, 14% for participant eligibility, 14% for data, 15% for both cross-cutting themes and publicity and 11% for programme or partnership management.

More widely, all organisations responding to the survey were asked what attracted them to the BBO ESF opportunity (Table 3.2). The factor most likely to attract organisations to the BBO ESF opportunity was that it matched their core areas, values or expertise (39%), provided the chance to help those most in need (36%) or gave the opportunity to work with partners or like-minded organisations (30%). About a quarter (23%) said it gave them the chance to enhance or expand their services (26%), with 15% stating it provided them with access to ESF or European funding. There was little difference in response according to whether organisations were lead or partner organisations.

Table 3.2: Factors attracting organisations to BBO ESF opportunity

	% of organisations		
	Total	Lead	Partner
Matches our core area / values / experience	39	46	36
Opportunity to help those most in need	36	46	36
Opportunity to work with partners / like-minded organisations	30	31	30
Chance to enhance / expand our services	23	21	23
Access to ESF / European funding / possibility of funding	13	10	14

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	% of organisations		
	Total	Lead	Partner
Long term	7	14	5
Flexibility of approach	7	11	5
Other	4	1	4
Base (involvement in BBO application):	*271*	*72*	*201*

Source: Grant holder survey, open question

3.2 Delivery challenges

Respondents to the grant holder survey were asked to state any ongoing challenges they envisaged in delivering their BBO project and in respect of the need to meet ESF requirements (Table 3.3). Participant eligibility or evidence gathering (28%) was the challenge most commonly envisaged. Others noted by more than a tenth of organisations were bureaucracy or paperwork (18%), project management or co-ordination of communication (17%), changes to guidance or requirements (14%) and initial or ongoing engagement of participants (10%).

Table 3.3: Ongoing challenges envisaged regarding ESF requirements

	% of organisations		
	Total	Lead	Partner
Participant eligibility / evidence gathering	28	32	26
Bureaucracy / paperwork	18	13	20
Project management / co-ordination of communication	17	13	19
Changes to guidance / requirements	14	28	10
Initial / ongoing engagement of participants	10	3	12
Data collection / entry / storage	8	10	7
Ensuring partners compliance	7	21	2
Tight deadlines / short timescales	6	10	4
Duplication with other programmes	3	0	3
Targets / meeting targets	2	0	3
Inflexibility of the approach	1	0	1
Financial clawback	1	3	0
Others	4	3	5
None	9	3	11
Don't know	1	1	1
Base:	*271*	*72*	*201*

Source: Grant holder survey, open question

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A large minority (46%) of organisations said that they would welcome further support or shared learning. For example, 34% of organisations stated that they would welcome further support around financial claims, while 17% highlighted learning, peer support, networking or best practice and 13% paperwork and record keeping requirements in this context (Table 3.4).

Table 3.4 : Support welcomed

	% of organisations
Finance/resources (claims, evidence, reporting etc.)	34
Learning, peer support, networking, best practice	17
Paperwork, record keeping	13
Eligibility	11
Other evidence requirements (not financial, eligibility)	10
(Continual) changes	6
Monitoring (system)	6
Other reporting	6
Cross-cutting themes	6
Ongoing support	6
Management (project, staff)	5
Publicity	5
(Working with) partners	5
Audit	5
Evaluation	2
Measuring outcomes	3
Procurement	3
Other	22
Base:	*(122)*

Source: Grant holder survey, open question

The open text responses provided by organisations on this theme highlighted that they often had general support requirements, but also specific queries, often around eligibility, as demonstrated by these verbatim responses to the survey:

> *"We still feel we are not totally clear on financial eligibility for claims and are concerned about claw back in future years"*
> *[Partner organisation]*

> *"BBO specific requirements in relation to evidence of direct expenditure and how match will be evidenced"*
> *[Partner organisation]*

> *"Financial evidence, what counts as a final outcome. participant allowances and incentives (what is defined as an allowance and what is an incentive)"*
> *[Lead organisation]*

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Just over a tenth of respondents welcomed support around learning, peer support, networking or best practice:

"We are always willing to learn from anyone else's experience to see if we can do things better. While our project is currently going OK we would always be interested in sharing good practice"
[Lead organisation]

"Partnership discussions/sharing ideas from other similar BBO projects around the country - lessons learnt on all elements including financial claims etc."
[Lead organisation]

"I still don't feel that shard information is clear and some of the organisation done want to share information to the delivery partners"
[Partner organisation]

There was a strong perception from programme stakeholders that there had been an underestimate on the part of lead organisations of the amount of support their partners would require in terms of developing monitoring and reporting mechanisms. The focus group with funding officers, revealed a perception that while in some cases lead organisations had not recognised this enough, some were more up to speed, and had planned resources accordingly to support their partners. This was likewise evident from the survey responses, reflecting a perception that the ESF has a high administrative burden that falls on partner as well as lead organisations. A subsequent focus for the evaluation will involve exploring how support needs are being recognised and managed across partnerships.

Stakeholder interviews indicated that BLF have also recognised the support needs in this area, with the ESF Support Contract being delivered by an external contractor continuing to offer support until December 2017. In addition, much of the support planned will be focused on themes such as those noted above. For example, each partnership will receive individual support through their first financial claim. Additionally some additional support events are currently being planned to respond to emerging needs.

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4.0 Partnership Arrangements

Partnerships are a key theme for BBO. At this stage of the evaluation we present emerging findings on the size and nature of the partnerships formed to access the BBO programme (Section 4.1), the different partnership structures being used (section 4.2), the extent to which new partnership arrangements have been stimulated by the BBO opportunity (Section 4.3), and current challenges and changes to partnerships (Section 4.4)

4.1 BBO Partnerships

Guidance from BLF encouraged partnership formation to respond to the project outlines to ensure that a breadth of expertise was available, and to potentially maximise impacts, but this was not mandatory. Equally, the guidance did not stipulate any specific format or nature of partnership working. It was also stated that there would be no favouritism with regard to the types or sectors of partners involved, and that single applicants would not be disadvantaged as it is accepted that a single organisation could deliver the requirements on its own.

Analysis of the partnership profiles detailed in the BBO applications reviewed to date suggests that there is some degree of variety in the partnerships formed. The mean average number of partners per partnership for the BBO programme is 23. However, there is a wide range in terms of the number of organisations involved in different partnerships, between 1 and 82 organisations. The largest partnerships have been formed in response to two project outlines within Cornwall and Isles of Scilly LEP area, with one project partnership comprising 82 organisations and another 79. This may reflect the wide geographical areas covered by the projects concerned, the broad focus of the project outlines in terms of target groups and interventions.

There was a perception from programme stakeholders that in some cases partners who were included in bids were not always aware of this. Stakeholders noted that there was a tendency amongst applicants in some cases to interpret partners as being simply organisations operating locally or of relevance; hence some bids included DWP as a partner, for example, when this was unlikely to have been the case in the sense of actually participating in the partnership.[6] As a result, the stated number of partnership organisations noted above both in the BBO applications and in our survey data may be reflective of this approach to reporting. This approach to partnership formation was not in line with the guidance issued by the Big Lottery Fund. It will be important for the evaluation to explore how these partnerships are working in practice, in terms of how active a role partners play, and whether those led by a single organisation are able to reach participants and deliver all planned activity in-house.

The data captured from the BBO applications did not allow for analysis of the type of organisations' involvement in each partnership. All lead organisations who responded to the survey were, however, asked to state what types of organisations their partners were, as illustrated in Table 4.1.[7] It should be noted that

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[6] Big Lottery Fund guidance on partnership requirements stated that partners were those who had a paid role in the delivery of the project.

[7] This table shows the proportion of responding organisations that had at least one partner in any of the categories. As a result, it should not be taken as necessarily reflecting proportions of the total number of organisations participating. It also does not include the type of organisation that responded to the question.

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the table reflects the proportion of organisations with at least one partner in each category, and should therefore not be interpreted as presenting the proportion of total organisations in each category.

Table 4.1: Type of organisation as partners

	% of organisations having a partner in the category concerned
Charity	90
Community Interest Company/Social Enterprise	60
Company/private sector	38
Public Sector – Local Authority	36
Further or higher education	22
University	3
Public Sector – Other	7
Other	14
Base (lead organisations):	*72*

Source: Grant holder survey, multiple response question

Almost all (90%) of BBO partnerships involved partners that were charities, with over half having partners that were a community interest company or social enterprise (60%). Just over a third of partnerships involved a company or private sector organisation (38%) or had partners that were in the public sector in a local authority setting (36%), and just over a fifth (22%) had further or higher education partners. This is indicative that BBO partnerships involve multiple partners from across different sectors.

4.2   Partnership structures

The grant holder survey was used to explore the nature of partnership arrangements and structures. All respondents were given a short list of different activities and asked to state which of them they are, or will be, involved in, with participants allowed to state as many activities as were relevant (Table 4.2).

Table 4.2: Activities partners are or will be involved in

	% of organisations		
	Total	Lead	Partner
Delivery	86	69	92
Management or strategic direction of the project	40	96	21
Referrals	40	53	35
Other	4	1	5
Base:	*271*	*72*	*201*

Source: Grant holder survey, multiple response question

Organisations tended to be primarily involved in delivery (86%), with a large minority also working on referrals or management/strategic direction (both 40%). This alone suggests that different organisations will have different roles in the delivery of BBO activity. As may be expected, the pattern of activities was slightly different depending on whether organisations were a lead or partner, with more lead organisations taking part in management or strategic direction (96% compared to 21%). In total, 92% of partners and

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69% of leads were involved in delivery and 35% of partners and 53% of leads in referrals, suggesting that a substantial proportion of lead organisations were still involved in these areas.

Based on these initial results, the analysis of application forms, and other intelligence, the following typologies of partnership approaches are likely to be evident across the BBO programme:

- Type 1 – Lead partner acting as a managing agent/strategic lead and not likely to engage in direct delivery. Larger partnership identified for purpose of referral and delivery.
- Type 2 – Lead partner engaging in delivery alongside partnership identified for purpose of referral and delivery; includes both geographical and specialist providers.
- Type 3 – Lead partner likely to exclusively deliver provision, none or limited number of other partners identified.

This will be further explored in subsequent evaluation activity and reflected on in the shared learning activity to explore what works in terms of partnership arrangements and structures for delivering in different contexts.

4.3   New versus existing partnerships

Each lead organisation that responded to the grant holder survey was asked to state the proportion of partner organisations they already had a working relationship with. This was intended to enable examination of the extent to which new partnerships were formed to respond to the BBO opportunity (Table 4.3).

Table 4.3: Proportion of partner organisations with pre-existing relationship

	% of organisations
20% or less	19
21-40%	28
41-60%	22
61-80%	17
81-100%	14
Mean percentage with pre-existing relationship	42
Base (lead organisations answering):	*72*

Source: Grant holder survey, single response question

On average lead organisations had an existing relationship with under half (42%) of their partners and did not have a pre-existing relationship with the remaining 58%, suggesting a core partnership or existing working relationships have been expanded or enhanced through BBO. For 14% of lead organisations, however, over 80% of their partners were reported to be pre-existing. As may have been expected, the 10 organisations with more than 80% pre-existing relationships tended to have smaller partnerships (7 between 2 and 8, the remaining three between 11 and 13). Further analysis and examination will explore whether, and how far, the existing partners had appropriate skills to deliver the specific requirements of the project outlines.

All respondents were also asked to state if they had been involved in any other BBO applications and provided with a list of options from which they could provide multiple answers (Table 4.4). In total, just over half (53%) had been involved in another BBO application. Just over a third (39%) of all organisations had

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been involved in another partnership that had been successful in being awarded a grant, with around a fifth (21%) involved in an unsuccessful application and 6% waiting to hear on the outcome. Further examination will be possible to explore whether local specialist organisations are supporting multiple partnerships or whether this pattern is a consequence of larger, national organisations leading bids in multiple locations.

Table 4.4: Involvement in multiple BBO applications

	% of organisations		
	Total	Lead	Partner
Yes – involved in another BBO partnership which has been awarded a grant	39	43	38
Yes – involved in another BBO application which has not been awarded a grant	21	35	17
Yes – involved in another BBO application where the outcome is not yet known	6	10	5
No	47	33	52
Base:	*270*	*72*	*200*

Source: Grant holder survey, multiple response question

4.4   Changes and challenges for BBO partnerships to date

Anecdotal evidence from programme stakeholders suggests that there have been examples of partners dropping out as the BBO application process went on. This was explicitly asked in the grant holder survey and almost half (47%) of the 72 lead organisations said their partnership had changed. The main reasons were due to partners dropping out of the partnership, with this being mentioned by 31 of the 34 organisations concerned (91%). Generally this was due to partners realising that the requirements involved were too burdensome from their perspective / situation, and/or restructuring or organisations ceasing to exist. Such scenarios are illustrated by these comments made by lead organisations:

"One partner had to drop out post the grant set up phase due to a national restructure and lack of resource"
[Lead organisation]

"Partners in the Stage 1 application have dropped out due to restructuring, poor financial return, or unwillingness to complete ESF paperwork"
[Lead organisation]

"One partner pulled out of the consortium between phases 1 and 2. They were a private company, and wanted to make a profit, but their main contact only presented the fact it was an actual costs only programme to the board during the second application stage"
[Lead organisation]

"One of the key partners (a large XXXX) that was originally intended to lead on publicity/ comms and volunteer management had to withdraw from the role post-stage 1 due to significant operational changes in their organisation, resulting in their inability to continue to fulfil the requirements of the role. With the Lottery's consent, much of this was brought in house (to YYYY) with increased roles for some of the other partners"
[Lead organisation]

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Respondents were also asked to state what the key challenges were in their partnership approach and how they have been overcome (Table 4.5). With the exception of one organisation who said there were no challenges or solutions, all organisations mentioned at least one challenge. The most prevalent challenges were the variety and diversity of partners (33%) and communication (22%).

Table 4.5: Challenges and solutions in partnership building

	% of organisations
Challenge	
Variety / diversity of partners	*33*
Communication	*22*
Coordination / consistency	*13*
Meeting compliance requirements	*13*
Bureaucracy / paperwork	*13*
Time taken / delays	*11*
Changes to process / guidelines / organisation	*10*
Size of partnership	*6*
Geographical location/coverage	*6*
Solution	
Regular meetings / events / contact	*40*
Coordination / consistency	*19*
Support/additional support to partner	*16*
Further resources	*10*
Limiting the size of partnership	*5*
Communication	*16*
None	*11*
Base (lead organisations):	*63*

Source: Grant holder survey

The main solution was having regular meetings, events and contact (40%), with co-ordination and consistency (19%) as the next main solution and support/additional support to partner (16%) and further resources (10%) the only other solutions mentioned by at least a tenth of responding organisations. This suggests that steps in terms of more frequent contact may help solve a number of issues both in their own right and, potentially, as a means of ensuring greater co-ordination and consistency across partners.

In addition, respondents were asked to state how effective they felt partnership working on the programme had been so far. The vast majority of organisations (96%) felt their partnership had been effective, with 46% saying it had been very effective and 50% fairly effective. Only 4% said it was not very effective and 1% not at all effective. Respondents were asked to state why they had rated the programme effectiveness as they had. A large proportion of respondents identified positive reasons for the overall effectiveness of their work, with these mainly focusing on the value of partnership work (29%), positive aspects of the work of the lead organisation (15%), and communication (14%). Emerging learning on what has worked well is further illustrated by the following direct quotes:

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"Partners have worked collaboratively and not competitively"
[Partner organisation]

"The Partners have been very supportive and we have made some essential communication links with other like-minded organisations that are dedicated to help those who are disadvantaged and marginalised in the [BBO] area"
[Partner organisation]

"We have internal delivery organisations working with external partners and it has helped the profile of reaching people to lead this type of project"
[Lead organisation]

"We are new to this experience but we are progressing in the right direction and the lead partner has also been quite supportive"
[Partner organisation]

"Our Lead provider has brought the partnership together from each section of the area with specialised skills to deliver this project and ensure its success"
[Partner organisation]

"A great deal of effort has gone into partnership meetings, networking and collaboration"
[Partner organisation]

"We have had the time to cooperate, identifying strengths and working together on remedying weaknesses. Sharing best practice and brainstorming new approaches with an excellent partner team has been incredibly valuable for all partners"
[Partner organisation]

"It has brought together organisations who haven't previously worked together. There is a growing sense of a common bond and shared information, knowledge and expertise because all the partners are committed to the well being of those young people who are most disadvantaged"
[Lead organisation]

"Most of all we are all delivering the project in the spirit in which it was intended. This makes it easier to manage"
[Lead organisation]

"Because all partners have been involved. Everyone understands their role and we have been able to develop a new and different model of working that means everyone does what they are best at. Our experience as a partner in other BBO bids has differed from this in that the level of partnership engagement was quite superficial"
[Lead organisation]

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5.0 Summary and Next Steps

At this stage of the evaluation, early findings are emerging in relation to some of the key evaluation questions on access and barriers, working with ESF and partnership arrangements

Taken as a whole, the emerging evaluation evidence suggests that the aim of the BBO programme to secure the involvement from VCSE organisations with particular specialist experience of working with the hardest to reach groups is being fulfilled. On a similar theme there is evidence that BBO has been successful in bringing in organisations without ESF experience, hence 'widening things out'. Further analysis and examination is needed to ensure the involvement of different types of organisation is genuine and maximised for the benefit of the different target groups. Further profiling work will also be undertaken to explore the trends in partnership profiles across the geographical locations.

There is some evidence that the ESF requirements are perceived as a barrier to involvement for some organisations. However, the delivery of support at the application stage and organisations' prior ESF experience is helping to address this. Effective management and communication by lead organisations also appears to be assisting smaller organisations to navigate the requirements. Further work will seek to further identify the lessons for facilitating access to widen participation. From BLF's perspective it is clear that consistent communication on requirements was not always possible in the early stages of the programme. However, in many cases issues have been resolved over time and additional support is available while organisations embed ESF systems and requirements.

In the main, the BBO programme will be delivered by partnerships, hence providing access for more organisations. Evidence to date suggests that the BBO investment opportunity has stimulated new partnerships in some cases or expanded working relationships in others. Further evaluation and learning will focus on the early learning from partnership delivery in practice.

5.1 Next steps for evaluation and learning

- Evaluation and learning activity will continue throughout the evaluation period up to the end of 2019. Direct data collection and analysis by national evaluators will continue involving:

  - In-depth telephone interviews with a sample of BBO partnerships to further explore areas of effective practice or early delivery learning. These interviews will capture 'real life' examples of how VCSEs are coping with ESF requirements and provide practical advice on how they have overcome certain challenges and issues to feed into the learning cycle.

  - In-depth (i.e. 'deep and narrow') qualitative research will be undertaken with a sample of projects. The qualitative work will primarily aim to answer the questions of what types of intervention work best with certain target groups and why, looking at how projects can effectively engage a small number of hard to reach groups (what approaches and tactics worked well, which did not). They will also explore what sort of soft outcomes (intermediate outcomes) are being experienced. Thirdly, they will assess the critical success factors for engaging target groups effectively and supporting them towards and into employment. As part of the project visits, we will consult with all lead organisations and ask for a cross section of partner organisations to be included for interviewing. This will be complemented by focus groups and/or depth interviews with participants

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- ➢ Design and scoping work for the participant survey as the first task of the 'evaluating impact' work stream.

- ➢ Analysis of programme monitoring data provided by Big Lottery Fund. This will provide the evaluation team with a programme level overview to be reported in annual reports and inform the sampling for the tasks above. Synthesis of local evaluation reports and outputs will also be undertaken to add to the national evaluation evidence base.

- Shared learning activity will be facilitated across the programme based on a cycle of learning focusing on key themes:

  - ➢ Evidence or learning will be gathered through the data collection activity above, allied to evidence and literature reviews conducted by the evaluation team, reviews of local evaluation outputs and information posted by project staff on an online discussion platform.

  - ➢ Learning outputs such as learning papers or good practice guides will be produced and disseminated through social media and/or the evaluation website: buildingbetteropportunities.org.uk

  - ➢ Learning and networking events will serve to share learning amongst grant holders and further build on the evidence: The first two face-to-face networking and learning events were held in May 2017, involving all grant holders. The events served as the first large scale networking opportunity for BBO projects, an opportunity to formally introduce the evaluation and to gather feedback to refine the ongoing shared learning activity. Further events are planned to bring grant holders together, including an annual face-to-face workshop for grant holders in addition to regional or thematic networking and webinars.

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Annex A – Evaluation Research Questions

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Topics for investigation	Evaluation questions	WP1 Scoping and design	WP2 Evaluating access			WP3 Evaluating impact/Outcomes	
		Desk review of programme data	Survey of grant holders	Interviews with successful grant holders	Interviews with unsuccessful applicants	Qualitative research with a sample of projects	Participant survey
Access and barriers	• What are the characteristics of delivery partners? • How far as the fund been effective in securing involvement from VCSE organisations with particular specialist experience of working with the hardest to reach groups? • What are the perceived barriers to participation and how have these been addressed by the Fund and by partners? • What the lessons to date for facilitating access to widen participation amongst organisations with no or limited experience of ESF?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Working with ESF	• What are the issues that partnerships have faced in improving their understanding and experience of working with ESF? • What challenges and risks have been identified and how successfully have these been addressed? • What are the lessons to date on managing the use of ESF during project implementation?		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Partnership arrangements	• What is the nature of partnerships that have been formed to access the BBO programme? • To what extent are these proposed partnership arrangements in applications being delivered in practice? • How effectively is the programme reaching organisations that are new to ESF and stimulating new partnership arrangements? What are the critical success factors in mobilising new partnerships? • How far do partnerships reflect the focus of the programme on harder to reach groups? • What are the lessons to date for partnership formation and working?		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Delivery arrangements including outreach	• What are the main features of partnership delivery models and how are these intended to make sure that funding benefits harder to reach groups? • How the expertise of partners with particular experience of target groups being harnessed? • How are participants being reached and recruited?		✓	✓		✓	

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Topics for investigation	Evaluation questions	WP1 Scoping and design	WP2 Evaluating access			WP3 Evaluating impact/Outcomes	
		Desk review of programme data	Survey of grant holders	Interviews with successful grant holders	Interviews with unsuccessful applicants	Qualitative research with a sample of projects	Participant survey
	• How effective are communication and outreach approaches? • What outreach approach are effective for what groups and why?						
Profile of participants	• What are the key characteristics and needs of participants? To what extent have the identified hardest to reach participants been engaged and retained in activity through the programme? • What are the main identified barriers to labour market participation for these participants? • How are individual needs being assessed and responded to?	✓		✓		✓	✓
Intervention approaches	• What are the key features of the interventions being supported? • To what extent are interventions evidence-based? • How is support packaged to meet the needs of participants with multiple problems, both overall and sequentially? • How effectively are participants supported with childcare needs? • Are interventions being progressed according to plan? • What intervention approaches work best for what types of participants? • How are complex and multiple needs being addressed? • How is BBO investment being used to fill gaps or enhance existing provision? • What is the role of BBO interventions in supporting the achievement of broader ESIF plans? • How is provision linking to other provision locally and other ESF provision • Has BBO caused any confusion or difficulties for the delivery of other provision?			✓		✓	✓
Employer engagement	• What approaches are being used to engage employers to provide pathways to employment? • What is the existing capacity amongst delivery partners to be responsive to employer requirements? • What specific interventions are being used to mobile employers to support the aims of the programme?		✓			✓	

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Topics for investigation	Evaluation questions	WP1 Scoping and design	WP2 Evaluating access			WP3 Evaluating impact/Outcomes	
		Desk review of programme data	Survey of grant holders	Interviews with successful grant holders	Interviews with unsuccessful applicants	Qualitative research with a sample of projects	Participant survey
	• What are the characteristics of employers that are actively engaged and what benefits are reported? • What are the key success factors in engaging employers effectively?						
Outcomes	• How effectively is the programme contributing to improvements in soft outcomes for participants? • What is the performance in engaging participants in the programme? • What is the progress of participants in moving into education and training? • What is the progress of participants in moving into job readiness support? • What is the progress of participants in moving into job search activity? • What is the programme of participants in moving into employment and self-employment? • What is the quality of education, training and employment opportunities? • How specifically are BBO interventions contributing to these outcomes? • To what extent do outcomes vary based on factors such as delivery models, intervention type and target groups and why? • To what extent would outcomes have been achieved anyway (deadweight)	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Sustainability	• How far are outcomes expected to be • Sustained and is there variation by intervention type or target group? • How is provision supporting job retention? • How far is provision embedded in wider activity that will support sustainability? • How far is the programme building sustainable partnerships that will continue beyond the lifetime of the programme? • What are the critical success factors in sustaining outcomes?		✓	✓		✓	✓

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