



Coronavirus Community Support Fund Evaluation:

Learning from the process of delivering the grantholder Learning Hub and associated activities

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Funded by



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Executive summary

Introduction and context

Ipsos MORI, in partnership with New Philanthropy Capital and the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, was commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the Coronavirus Community Support Fund (CCSF) and the National Lottery COVID-19 Fund. The CCSF was targeted at small and medium sized community organisations delivering activities and support to people affected by the COVID-19 crisis. A total of £199m was allocated to CCSF and £187m was distributed. It was funded through the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). The National Lottery Community Fund (The Fund) was appointed to manage and distribute the CCSF funding.

Additionally, The Fund provided a total of £151.3m of funding, called the National Lottery COVID-19 Fund, to support the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector, including £20.5m of contract variations to existing grantholders and £53.9m through External Delegated Agreements (EDAs), which involved partner organisations using their networks and specialist knowledge to enable fast funding decisions to particular areas and sectors. Both CCSF and National Lottery COVID-19 grantholders were invited to take part in the Learning Strand of the evaluation. This report outlines what we found through the process of developing and delivering the Learning Strand.

The purpose, aims and development of the Learning Strand

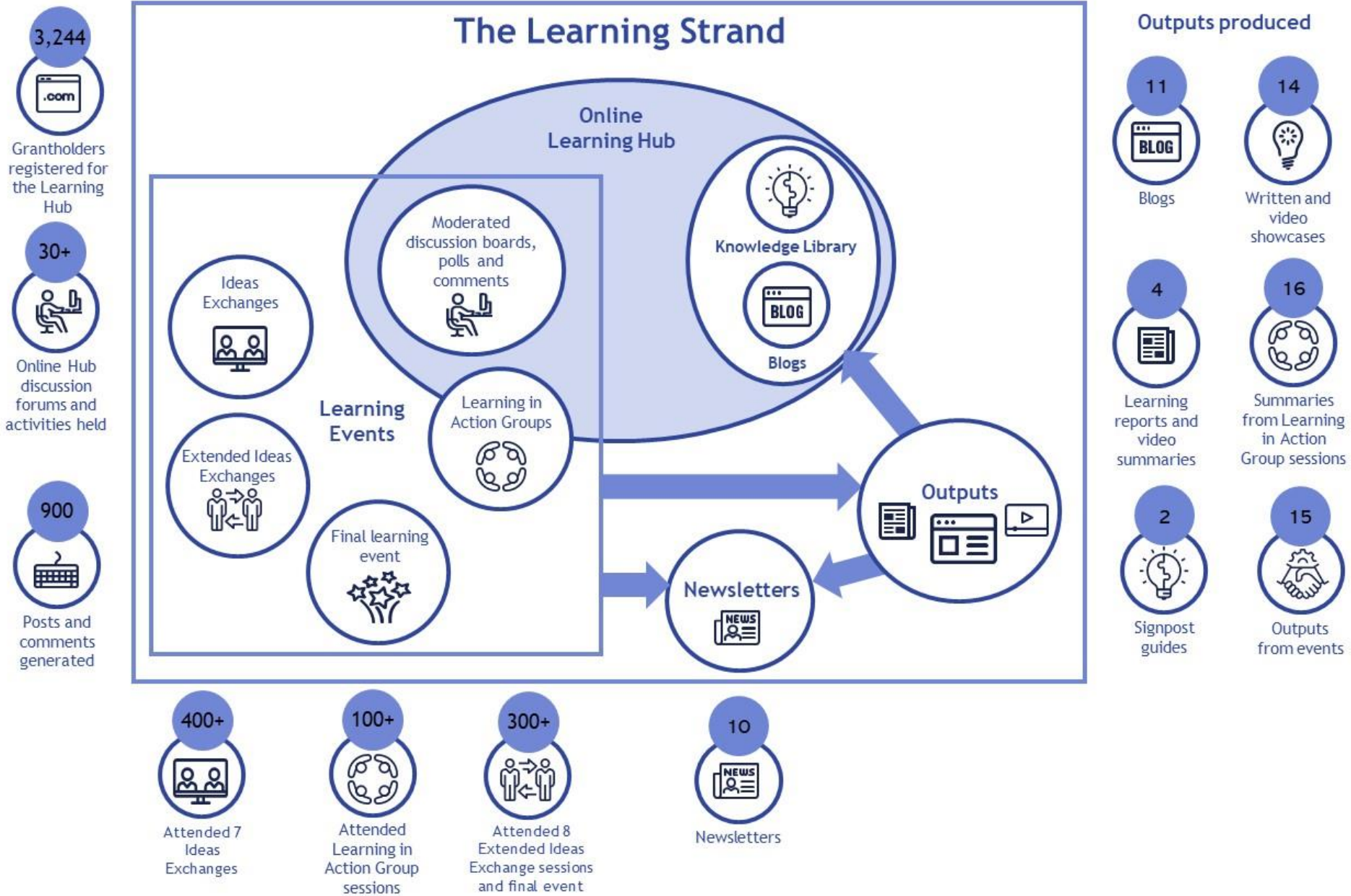
The Fund's aspiration for the Learning Strand was to:

- develop online learning activities that enabled grantholders to navigate their way through changing circumstances;
- identify and share innovative practice, lessons learned, and which approaches are most effective;
- understand what grantholders will continue doing into the future, what they will let go of, and why; and
- share, test, and debate this learning more widely.

The Learning Strand aimed to offer ways for CCSF and National Lottery COVID-19 grantholders to share experiences and learning during the crisis. This was also a new way of engaging with large numbers of VCSE organisations.

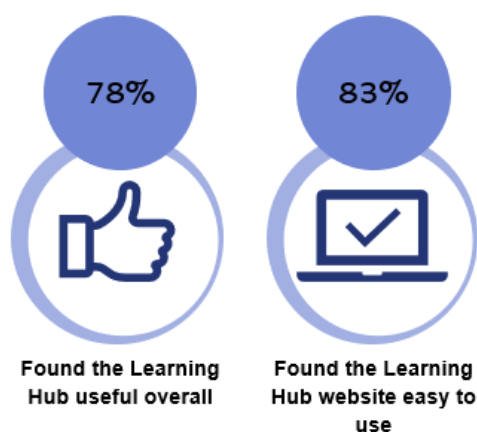
The COVID-19 crisis presented a unique and challenging context in which to develop new ways of connecting and learning, without face-to-face engagement. The Learning Strand was therefore designed to share and embed learning from a major programme of crisis funding in the VCSE sector. All of this was planned to be delivered at speed in order to support grantholders during the pandemic. It was also planned to be delivered virtually, rather than face to face.

Figure 1: The Learning Strand activities and events



This report outlines what we learnt from the process of delivering the Learning Strand, including what we intended to deliver, what was delivered and how, and what we learnt from this. It includes metrics on overall engagement and grantholder views about the Learning Strand. Thematic summaries of the learning that emerged during the Learning Strand activities and events will be published separately.¹

The Learning Strand provided a combination of free events and other activities for grantholders, centred around an online Learning Hub (see Figure 1). The Learning Strand went live in October 2020 and activities took place until July 2021. Overall, 3,244 signed up from the 13,352 grantholder organisations invited to take part. An archived version of the site will remain live for members to access until December 2021.



"[I] acquire[d] lots of knowledge and understanding through the networking opportunities from the Hub. It has prompted a lot of skills in our organisation."

Grantholder, final feedback survey

"The discussions and presentations at the live events offered new ideas that triggered different actions to improve our understanding of the situation we are in and how to adapt." Grantholder, final feedback survey

Hub members largely reflected the profile of grantholders overall in terms of region and type of grantholder organisation. Two-fifths of Hub members (40%) received a grant of less than £10,000, while the remaining three-fifths (60%) received a grant of more than £10,000.

We delivered a range of activities and events for Learning Hub members, including Learning in Action Groups, Ideas Exchanges, Extended Ideas Exchanges and the final event. Over a quarter of Hub members (27%) registered for an event.

Findings from a feedback survey with Learning Hub members showed that more than three quarters of respondents (78%, 139/179) found the Learning Hub and associated activities and learning outputs useful, while 83% (173/209) found the Learning Hub website easy to use.

Learning outputs were designed to capture and share learning and to increase engagement with the Learning Hub. Almost three quarters of respondents 72% (125/174) who had used the Hub said they found the Knowledge Library useful. The graphic below shows the outputs we produced.

¹ CCSF evaluation outputs can be found on The National Lottery Community Fund website via this link:

<https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/insights/covid-19-resources/responding-to-covid-19/ccsf-grantholder-evaluation>

Summary of grantholder learning

The main outputs from the Learning Strand were a series of four thematic learning reports and complementary video summaries. These explore key learning from grantholders during the pandemic, and each is briefly summarised below. Specific examples and ideas for applying learning in VCSE organisations are included in the full reports.²

1) *Building organisational resilience for the future*

The pandemic and the resulting restrictions required VCSE organisations to **anticipate, respond and adapt** as needs in their communities changed and to **plan ahead to ensure they could continue to operate their services**. However, many found their focus was on surviving and providing immediate support to people. Therefore, **thinking about the longer-term was difficult**. Building financial resilience through diversifying income sources had become critical to avoid closing services. When planning long-term, it was important for organisations to **retain their core purpose**, while still being flexible enough to adapt to changing needs.

2) *Creating a culture of wellbeing to support staff and volunteers*

The pandemic highlighted that **staff and volunteers were their organisations' most important asset**. Grantholders shared how looking after staff and volunteer wellbeing increased satisfaction and engagement in their respective roles. Wellbeing related to how people feel and function, both on a personal and a social level. Grantholders reflected that **creating a wider 'wellbeing culture'** was more effective than holding one-off events and suggested **specific working practices** to promote wellbeing.

3) *Building connections based on trust*

The pandemic highlighted the role of VCSE organisations as **trusted sources of information and links to the communities they support**. Grantholders recognised that it was important to use their connections and trusted status to **identify what people needed**, in order to rapidly adjust services to meet needs, and **share information** in a way people can understand and trust. The pandemic also changed how grantholders connected to their communities, with many moving activities online. The drive to meet new needs also emphasised the importance of **building the right partnerships**.

4) *How the pandemic shaped volunteering: learning for the future*

The pandemic and the associated restrictions resulted in **changes to the profile of volunteers** and how grantholder organisations **worked with and supported volunteers**. The number of volunteers also fluctuated, with **existing volunteers stepping down** and **new people offering help**. Grantholders **rethought definitions of volunteering** to include both formal and informal help (including neighbourliness). Many grantholders found that through

² CCSF evaluation outputs can be found on The National Lottery Community Fund website via this link: <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/insights/covid-19-resources/responding-to-covid-19/ccsf-grantholder-evaluation>

reviewing volunteer policies, roles and contracts, they could and **attract new and different types of people from diverse backgrounds** to volunteering roles.

What we learnt from delivering the Learning Strand

Designing an approach to promoting learning

In a crisis context where there was a need to move quickly and adapt to changing circumstances and need. We found that the following can help promote relevance and flexibility:

- **A continuous review process:** this allowed us to revise and develop the design of the Learning Strand in response to changing grantholder needs.
- **Working closely with key stakeholders:** while not a fully co-produced approach due to time constraints, we were able to include multiple perspectives in the development of the Learning Strand, lending it credibility.
- **Designing an engagement framework:** this helped ensure there was a shared and agreed understanding about the purpose of activities and outputs as the strand developed.
- **Taking a thematic approach:** this enabled us to strike a balance between a top-down approach developed by the Fund and Learning Strand team and a bottom-up approach shaped by engagement with grantholders. It also meant that topics could be generated quickly and were responsive to changing circumstances.

Designing an online learning site

An off-the-shelf product is cost effective and beneficial in a fast-paced context. The benefits of using an existing platform (instead of building a new platform from scratch) were that it was cost effective and meant the Learning Hub infrastructure could be set up quickly. The final feedback survey suggests that the majority of members found the Learning Hub easy to use. This was a key consideration given the timeframe for the project. The creation of a bespoke external landing page meant we were able to clearly introduce the Learning Hub aims and objectives and the terms of engagement to grantholders. However, using an existing product meant we largely had to work within the existing functionality and features. While this meant the online platform worked well for running activities, it limited the collection of relevant metrics and the extent to which the site could be adapted to the specific needs of the audience.

An email recruitment approach can work well. There was good take up from inviting people to take part by email, with one in five grantholders (20%) registering for an account.

It is important to anticipate the technical needs of your audience. This may require additional resource during the registration period. A responsive and individualised technical support process meant we could resolve technical issues promptly.

A clear accessibility policy can help members engage with online learning activities. Members said they liked the bold, bright and cheery colours and valued the interactive nature

of the site. Suggested improvements included better signposting between topics and including less information upfront so that the content is more easily digestible.

A clear escalation policy can mitigate risks of harm or reputational risks and ensure any issues are addressed promptly.

Promoting sustained engagement from a large group of people requires careful consideration of the audience's capacity and learning needs. People have different learning needs and preferences. Our experience suggests that some people may feel more comfortable as “passive” browsers of content, while a smaller group are active contributors.

Direct communication by email can help to remind people to engage in activities and events. Monthly newsletters can also be an **effective way to share updates.**

Learning activities

Providing a wide range of learning activity formats can help meet the diverse needs and learning preferences of a diverse audience. A **broad, thematic focus can enable a wide variety of people and types of organisations to come together.** While for some this was not appropriate, for others this worked well.

Live events can provide attendees with the opportunity to network and share experiences. Experienced event facilitators with dedicated roles can ensure sessions run smoothly. Providing ways for people to connect independently (for example, by exchanging contact details) may be more successful than encouraging the use of dedicated online spaces.

Smaller, longitudinal Learning in Action Groups can **provide a space for a smaller group of people to reflect together on ways of working and experiment with new ways of working.** This can help people connect and provide reassurance that others face similar issues. It is important to consider the time between sessions (as too long may reduce engagement) and ways to sustain engagement over time (such as through a formal commitment to attend).

Developing topics around broad themes focused on networking may promote engagement more than a focus on generating learning. People may also feel more comfortable describing what they do, rather than analysing their approach to generate insights. Taking a direct moderation approach (reaching out to individuals to invite them to take part or return to an activity) can be successful in some instances.

Learning outputs

For outputs to be relevant in a fast-changing context, they need to be diverse, iterative and responsive to emerging needs. By responding to what we heard from grantholders about their needs we were able to adapt the format of different outputs, accommodating different learning preferences.

Analytical outputs can be more resource intensive and less suited to sharing real-time learning. However, they appear to be more useful for those taking part.

1 Introduction

Ipsos MORI, in partnership with New Philanthropy Capital (NPC) and the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR), was commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the Coronavirus Community Support Fund (CCSF) and the National Lottery COVID-19 Fund. This report outlines what we found through the process of developing and delivering the Learning Strand of the evaluation.

This chapter provides an overview of the CCSF, the CCSF evaluation, and the Learning Strand, including its aims and objectives. The chapter then outlines the scope and structure of the remaining chapters of this report.

1.1 Context and background to the Coronavirus Community Support Fund and the National Lottery COVID-19 Fund

COVID-19 and the associated lockdown enforced by the UK Government in late March 2020 disproportionately affected some people and communities. Widespread recognition of these challenges led Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sector (VCSE) representatives to voice their concerns about the financial health, limited resource and ability of VCSE organisations to meet the increased and often changed nature of demand. The Government allocated a total of £199m to the Coronavirus Community Support Fund (CCSF) and £187m was distributed after administration and evaluation costs had been deducted, with the aim of meeting the following primary objectives:

- to increase community support to people disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 crisis, through the work of civil society organisations; and
- to reduce temporary closures of essential charities and social enterprises, ensuring services for people disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 have the financial resources to operate, and so reduce the burden on public services.

The CCSF was funded through the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), and The National Lottery Community Fund (The Fund) was appointed to manage and distribute the funding. The funding window for applications was open between the 22 May and 17 August 2020, which led to the first grants being awarded in early June 2020. Grants continued to be awarded until the end of October 2020, and all successful applicants (hereafter referred to as grantees) were given up to six months to spend their grant.

Additionally, The Fund provided a total of £151.3m of funding, called the National Lottery COVID-19 Fund, to support the VCSE sector. Grants allocated through The Fund's existing products or to existing grantees between 1 April and the end of November 2020 were classified as part National Lottery COVID-19 Fund. All grantees had up to six months to spend their grant. This included £20.5m of contract variations to existing grantees and £53.9m through External Delegated Agreements (EDAs), which involved partner organisations using their networks and specialist knowledge to enable fast funding decisions to particular areas and sectors.

The National Lottery COVID-19 Fund shared the two objectives above with CCSF, but had an additional third objective of providing funding to organisations to enable them to connect and support their communities. This was intended to be achieved through increased collaborative working and funding infrastructure related activities.

1.2 The CCSF evaluation and the Learning Strand

The CCSF evaluation comprised of four inter-related strands:

- a **process strand** to understand how the funding process has worked;
- an **impact strand** to assess the difference CCSF made to funded organisations, the people and communities that are supported, volunteers and wider society;
- a **value for money strand (VfM)** to assess the value to the public purse that the funding achieves; and
- a **learning strand** to bring together and share learning from grantholders during the crisis (the Learning Strand).

The Learning Strand was developed and managed by TIHR and Ipsos MORI (the Learning Strand team and the authors of this report). The aim was to offer **ways for grantholders to share experiences and learning during the crisis**. The Learning Strand also represented a new approach to engaging with large numbers of VCSE organisations. It was the first attempt by The Fund to commission a platform and learning activities at scale; with smaller grantholders (rather than funded through a single thematic programme); with no dedicated thematic focus, other than how they responded to the crisis and including grantholders with a diverse range of interests and needs; and in a crisis when people were both busy and potentially cut off from sources of peer support.

The COVID-19 crisis presented a **unique and challenging context** for developing new ways of connecting and learning, with no face-to-face engagement possible. The Learning Strand was therefore designed to share and embed learning from a major programme of crisis funding in the sector. All of this was anticipated to be delivered at speed.

The Learning Strand provided a **combination of free events and other activities for grantholders, centred around an online Learning Hub**.³ The Learning Hub went live in October 2020 and ran until July 2021. The outputs will remain available on the Hub until December 2021.

The Hub aimed to bring together learning for grantholders to use. It also provided opportunities for grantholders who signed up (referred to as ‘members’) to share their experiences and areas of interest and **connect with one another**. As well as activities on the Learning Hub, wider learning opportunities (outlined below) included:

- **Learning in Action Groups (LAGs)**: four LAGs (on staff and volunteer wellbeing; building connections and trust; delivering change in uncertain times; and the future

³ See Appendix C for a full breakdown of activities.

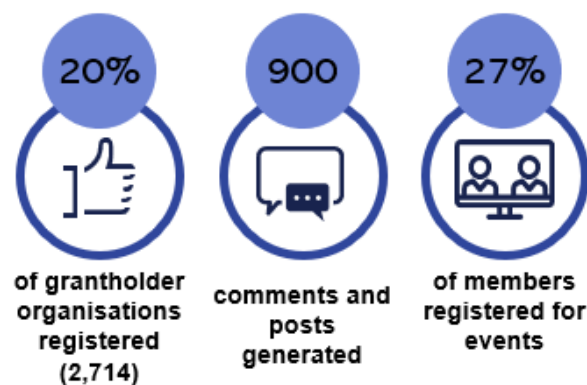
of volunteering) were held on Zoom and focused on topics selected by grantholders. They explored grantholders' experiences of delivering a CCSF project during the COVID-19 pandemic. LAGs created confidential peer-learning spaces across four sessions, with a dedicated private space on the Learning Hub to facilitate learning between sessions.

- **Ideas Exchanges (IEs) and Extended Ideas Exchanges (EIEs):** held on Zoom, these events provided opportunities for larger numbers of members to meet and establish connections with others, through exchanging their experiences, ideas and questions on different topics related to the impact of COVID-19 on their work.

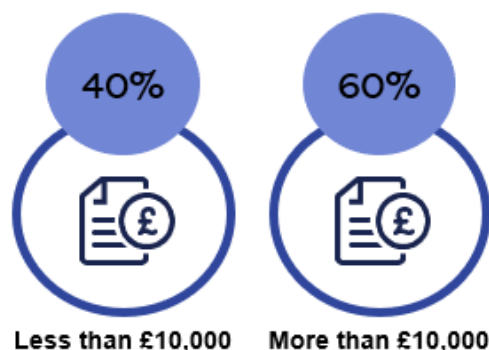
We also developed a range of outputs to capture and share learning with Hub members, grantholders and in some instances the wider VCSE sector.

1.3 Overview of Learning Hub members

Overall, **3,244 grantholders registered** to become members of the Learning Hub. Those who registered were from **2,714 organisations**, representing **20% of the 13,352 grantholder organisations** invited to take part.

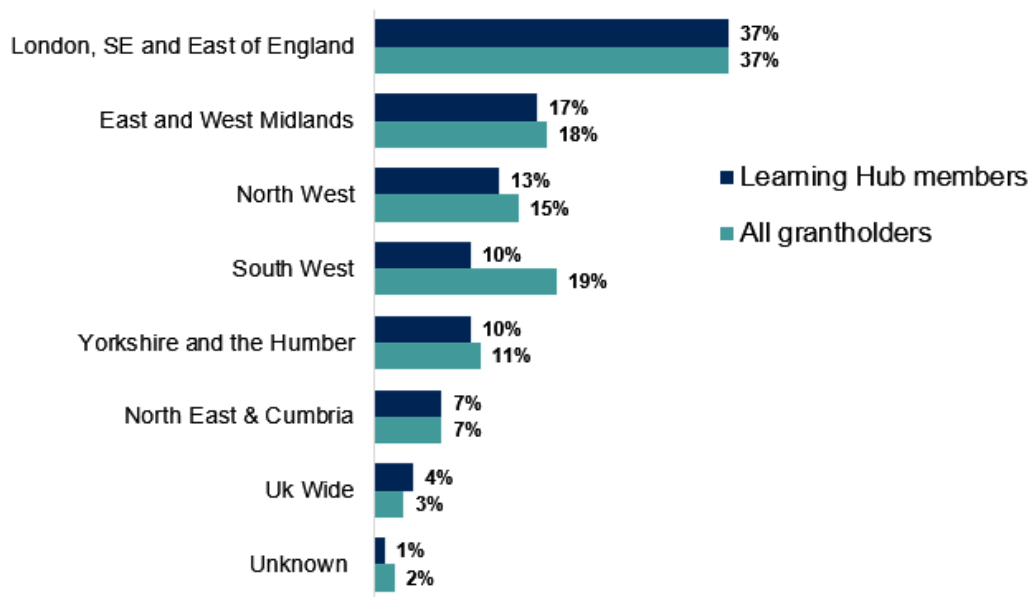


Two-fifths of Hub members (40%) received a grant of less than £10,000, while the remaining three-fifths (60%) received a grant of more than £10,000.



The regions where Hub members operated reflected the regional profile of grantholders overall (see Figure 1.1 below).

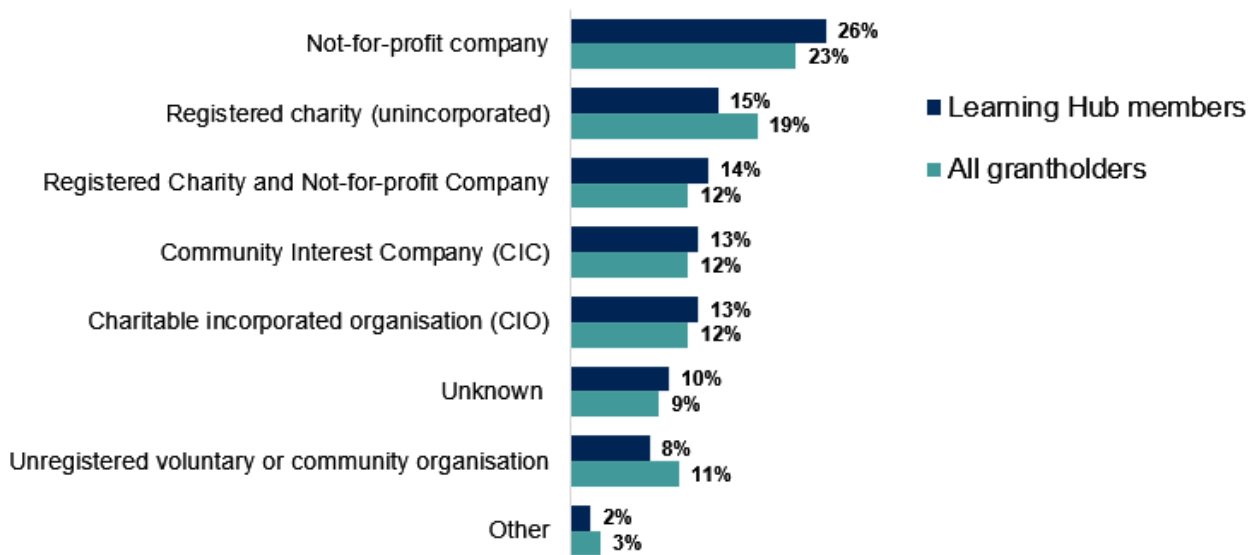
Figure 1.1: Proportion of Learning Hub member organisations by region, compared to grantholders invited overall



Base: all grantholder organisations invited to take part (13,352), Learning Hub registered organisations (2,714)

Not-for-profit companies and registered charities made up the largest proportion of registered members, again aligning with the profile of grantholders (see Figure 1.2 below).

Figure 1.2: Proportion of Learning Hub member organisations by organisation type, compared to overall sample



Base: all grantholder organisations invited to take part (13,352), Learning Hub registered organisations (2,714)

1.4 Structure and scope of this report

This report outlines how the Learning Strand was designed and delivered. The report covers from July 2020 when the evaluation started, to its end in July 2021. It draws on Learning Hub metrics, data from events (sign-ups and attendance), feedback from Learning Hub members

(including through a final online feedback survey with 209 responses), and the observations and reflections of the Learning Strand team. A further aim of the report is to highlight what we learnt from delivering the Learning Strand during the pandemic, including what worked well, challenges encountered and what could be improved. Our reflections are intended to inform others embarking on a similar learning programme with large numbers of diverse organisations, whether during a crisis situation or not.

There are five further chapters. Each of chapters 2-5 examines a different aspect of the Learning Strand and describes what happened, including what we learnt. The final chapter provides an overall summary of this report, including recommendations for similar future learning programmes.

2 Design and development of the Learning Strand

This chapter outlines what we learnt from the process of developing the Learning Strand. The Learning Strand was intended to develop iteratively, especially as the pandemic situation changed. The chapter starts with an overview of the original aims and how we set out to meet them. We also outline key changes to developing the design over time. It ends with our reflections about what worked well and less well in the design and development of the Learning Strand.

2.1 The purpose of the Learning Strand

The Fund's original vision for the Learning Strand and its purpose was to:

- develop online learning activities that enabled grantholders to navigate their way through changing circumstances
- identify and share innovative practice, lessons learned, and which approaches are most effective to achieve project goals;
- understand what grantholders will continue doing into the future, what they will let go of, and why; and
- share, test and debate this learning more widely.

The Learning Strand was also unique when compared to previous learning approaches delivered as part of The Fund's work. It was The Fund's first attempt to commission a platform and learning activities **during an emergency response and at scale**; with a **diverse group of grantholders**, including smaller grantholders (rather than through a single thematic programme); with **no dedicated thematic focus** other than how they responded to the crisis. The Learning Strand therefore set out to **address a diverse range of interests and needs** during a period when people were extremely busy and potentially cut off from peer and other types of support.

The Fund wanted to explore **ways to engage large numbers of organisations in online interactive activities**, where grantholders could join, share their experiences and learn from one another. At the same time, **deeper engagement with grantholders** was envisaged as taking place through a **range of 'webinar-style' activities**.

We proposed an approach that sought to **develop systematic methods for capturing, storing and sharing knowledge**, including **through co-production with key stakeholders and grantholders** (as far as this was possible given the context of the COVID-19 crisis). We also wanted to **draw on monitoring information** about grantholders (including organisation type, purpose, location and size) in order to **target some of the learning opportunities**.

Our overall approach aimed to ensure that **the structure, format and activities were proportionate and fit for purpose** and met the needs of grantholders as the primary

audience, as well as useful for other audiences (including The Fund, DCMS, and the VCSE sector more broadly). Our proposed design intended to bring together existing and new learning and to:

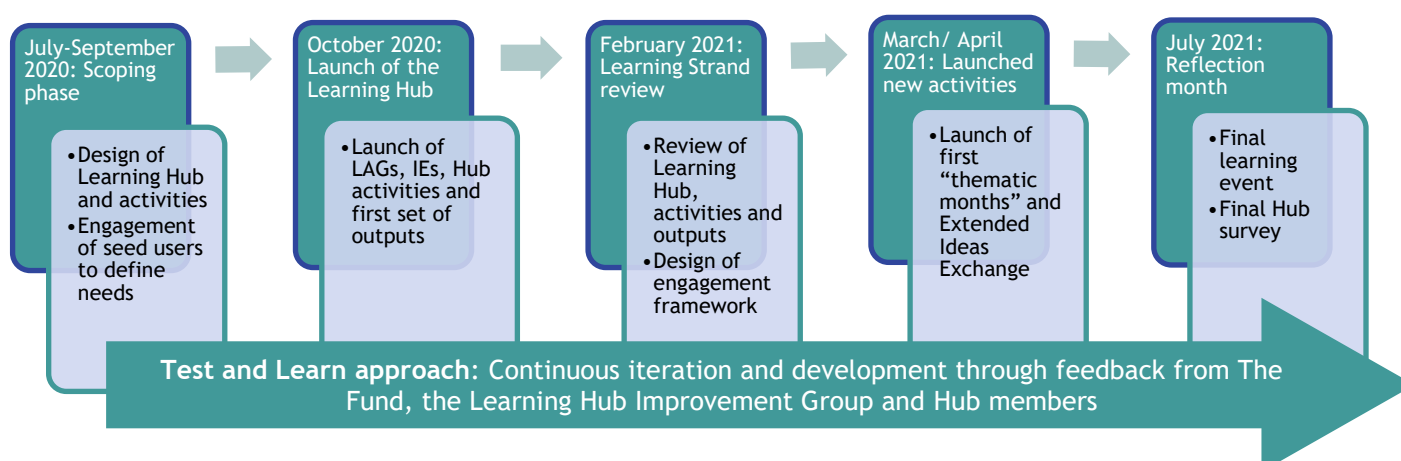
- offer a space for people to meet virtually and ask questions, speak about their experience of COVID-19, share advice and generate insights about shared challenges;
- create opportunities for grantholders to apply this learning to their projects and organisations;
- provide the basis for initiating new networks, and support collaborative working and information sharing; and
- provide accessible learning for the future about how to respond to national crises and emergencies.

Key changes subsequently made to the design of the Learning Strand are outlined below.

2.2 Development of the Learning Strand over time

Central to the design of the Learning Strand was **being able to test and adapt different approaches and learn from them as we progressed**. There were two principal phases to developing the Learning Strand: a scoping stage in July 2020 and a detailed review of the activity plan in February 2021. Weekly internal meetings between Ipsos MORI and TIHR, and fortnightly meetings with The Fund provided additional ongoing opportunities for reflection and development. We also set up a Learning Hub Improvement Group to provide feedback on the Learning Strand.⁴ The development phases are shown in Figure 2.1 below.

Figure 2.1: Key development phases of the Learning Strand



2.2.1 The scoping stage

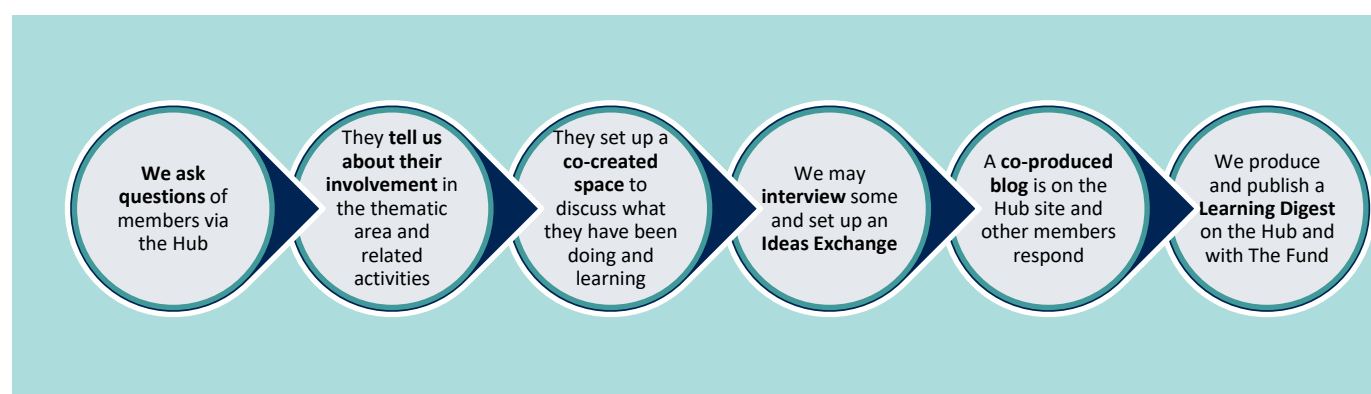
As well as a series of meetings with The Fund, during the scoping stage we consulted with a group of seed users on how to best meet the needs of grantholders. Contextual factors were a

⁴ The Learning Hub Improvement Group was established to help guide the development of the Hub and activities. 12 grantholders who had shown interest were invited to contribute to regular discussions about the Learning Strand over Zoom and by email.

key consideration in the design: COVID-19 presented a unique and challenging situation in which to develop new ways of connecting and we were therefore ‘learning by doing’. The developing context also resulted in changes to the objectives of the Learning Strand. During scoping, it became clear that innovation should not be a specific focus for the Learning Strand given that delivery was happening during a crisis. Capturing grantholder learning and sharing good practice in the context of the pandemic was agreed to be more useful and realistic. Scoping also led to changes in planned activities and outputs, outlined further in the following chapters.

The scoping phase included proposing a likely process for moving from an ‘idea’ or theme, through a set of activities to a final output (a ‘digest’ of learning, as outlined in Figure 2.2 below). The original intention for themes was for a ‘bottom-up’ approach, with topics for exploration coming from grantholders. However, there were few opportunities to explore grantholder interests during scoping. This was due to a need to preserve grantholder capacity to deliver their emergency response projects and the pace of development. In addition, we had to ensure the Hub went live as early as possible to allow sufficient time to support grantholders during the crisis. Therefore, in order to stimulate grantholders to join the Hub and take part in activities, the Learning Strand team shaped early discussions based on existing learning and information from The Fund’s activities with grantholders about emerging concerns for the VCSE sector during the crisis.

Figure 2.2: Learning process as outlined in the scoping report



Adapted from the CCSF Evaluation Scoping Report November 2020

The Learning Strand team and The Fund subsequently used their combined knowledge of the VCSE sector during the crisis to agree themes considered to be topical and relevant, yet open enough to encourage participation. Grantholders were also given an opportunity to shape the topics through a ‘contest’ on the Learning Hub⁵. Initially, together with The Fund we selected the four topics that received most interest. These further evolved in discussions with The Fund and other VCSE organisations. The initial themes are outlined below:

⁵ Contests were online activities where members could suggest topics and vote for topics suggested by others.

1. **Staff and volunteer wellbeing** explored the challenges faced by grantholders around staff and volunteer wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic, including how grantholders responded to these challenges.
2. **Building connections and trust during the pandemic** explored the challenges and opportunities around moving to online service delivery, building trust at a distance, and trying to stay connected with people in the shifting pandemic context, given considerable uncertainty about what was safe practically, and what beneficiaries needed.
3. **Delivering change in uncertain times** explored how grantholders came together to meet local needs and the changes they made to address the immediate challenges their communities were facing. Grantholders were also invited to explore what strategies they were using and would continue to use in the future.
4. **The future of volunteering** explored changes to volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what these might mean longer term. This included discussing the concept of volunteering, and how organisations could engage volunteers while also supporting them.

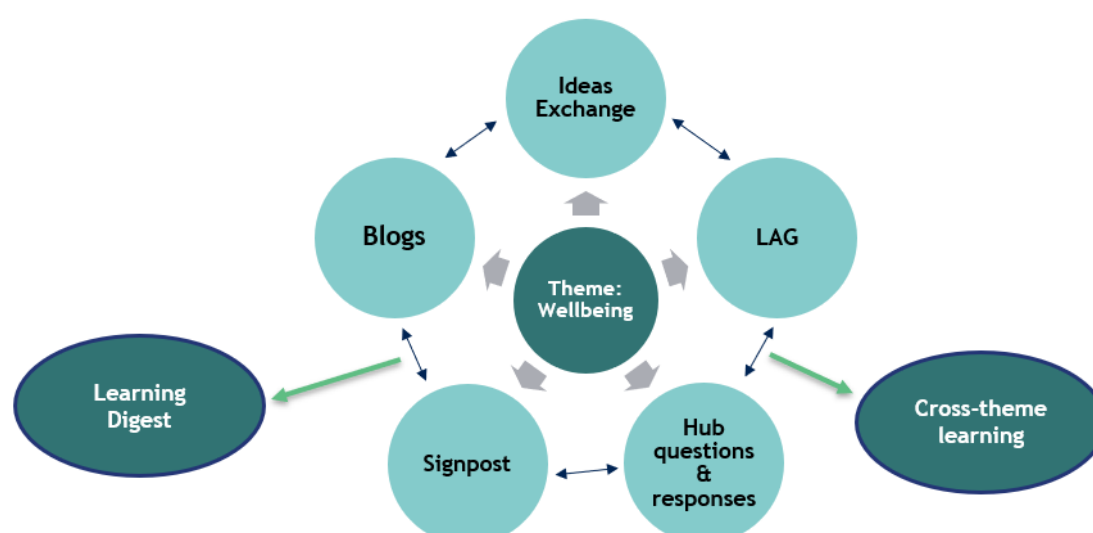
As the Learning Strand unfolded, feedback from grantholders and The Fund suggested that the learning model required additional flexibility. We therefore revised the model to enable greater movement across and between themes, topics and activities. The process involved:

- Taking emerging learning from activities with grantholders to inform the direction of travel (including from events, Learning Hub activities or raised by the Learning Hub Improvement Group). The emerging learning was reflected back as questions for Hub members in new activities.
- We designed new outputs and activities on an ongoing basis, in response to what grantholders told us about their needs and what we expected would be useful to them.

Although changes were made to the model, the aim was still to develop final learning reports as summary and legacy documents.⁶ Over time, the learning that was planned to feed in to these digests broadened, as outlined in Figure 2.3.

⁶ CCSF evaluation outputs can be found on The National Lottery Community Fund website via this link: <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/insights/covid-19-resources/responding-to-covid-19/ccsf-granholder-evaluation>

Figure 2.3: Redesigned relationship between themes, activities and outputs



2.2.2 Learning Strand review stage

We carried out a full review of activities and outputs in February 2021, to ensure that the Learning Strand continued to meet the needs of grantholders. Key changes to the design of activities are outlined in Chapter 4.

As part of the review, we developed an engagement framework. The framework intended to clarify the purpose(s) of each activity and output, while ensuring the aims of the Learning Strand were achieved across the activities and outputs as a whole. This was necessary because the main purpose of activities and outputs was not set out clearly during the early stages of delivery. As a result, we identified a risk that by trying to achieve multiple aims, we could dilute the effectiveness of activities and outputs. The framework outlined four key purposes:

- **Listen:** an opportunity to listen to members' experiences and concerns, by inviting members to speak about what matters to them;
- **Generate:** an opportunity to probe deeper and gain more detailed and nuanced understanding of key issues and challenges, in order to generate new learning, beyond what was already understood;
- **Share:** an opportunity to share learning with members. This included learning from activities and events, as well as content that emerged through wider evaluation activities or existing Fund outputs; and
- **Connect:** to encourage and provide opportunities for members to network and build connections with each other.

The four overarching themes developed during the scoping stage (see section 2.2.1) were also reviewed in February 2021. We identified four cross-cutting topics by reviewing and discussing emerging learning from Learning Strand activities. These new themes were intended to widen

participation from Learning Hub members; harness and build on existing knowledge; and synthesise learning within and across themes. The four further themes are outlined below:

1. ***Building trust in communities*** was developed from the theme of *Building connections and trust*. This theme aimed to harness grantholders' collective and collaborative experience of building and maintaining trust with the people they work with; sharing what worked for them when overcoming distrust and building sustainable relationships.
2. ***Planning scenarios for the future*** linked to the theme of *Delivering change in uncertain times* and aimed to provide members with the opportunity to focus on strategic planning and develop practical strategies as they planned for the future, as well as a space to build networks and exchange skills.
3. ***The value of small organisations*** set out to enable grantholders to share successes and challenges of small organisations specifically.⁷ It also aimed to provide spaces for smaller organisations to come together to network and consider the future. This theme was intended to create opportunities to harness good practice to inform future planning for small grants programmes.
4. ***Our time is now! Moving forward*** was designed to support grantholders to share their views about how to move forward beyond the pandemic, including the challenges they faced and the learning that they wanted to take forward.

2.3 What we learnt about the design of the Learning Strand

The Learning Strand design took place in a unique and challenging context, with a need to move quickly and adapt to changing circumstances and needs. A flexible design based on a range of collaborative actions allowed us to adapt over time, which was essential given the ongoing uncertainty in a fast-moving environment as the COVID-19 landscape changed. These included:

- The **continuous review process**, which enabled us to revise and develop the design of the Learning Strand appropriately in response to changing grantholder needs. As a project of this type had not been attempted previously under similar conditions, we were learning by doing (rather than building on previous experience).
- **Working closely with key stakeholders** (including The Fund and a small number of grantholder seed users), which enabled us to include multiple perspectives in the development of the Learning Strand, lending it credibility. While a fully co-produced design with all stakeholders (including The Fund, grantholders and wider evaluation partners) may have been preferable, this was not possible given time constraints.
- The **engagement framework** helped ensure there was a shared and agreed understanding about the purpose of activities and outputs as the Learning Strand developed.

⁷ There is no simple definition of constitutes a “small” VCSE organisation. However, NVCO guidance states a small charity is one with an income under £100,000 per annum.

- Taking a **thematic approach** allowed us to design activities around broad themes, so that they would be relevant to a range of grantholders. It also enabled us to strike a balance between a top-down approach shaped by The Fund and the Learning Strand team (which may have been seen as less legitimate to grantholders) and a bottom-up approach shaped by engagement with grantholders (which would have required more time).

3 The Learning Hub

This chapter is about the online Learning Hub platform. It outlines the process of designing and delivering the Learning Hub and what we learnt.

3.1 The design of the Learning Hub

The CCSF Learning Hub aimed to provide an online space for grantholders to share their experiences and learning about delivering during a pandemic, as well as to connect with other grantholders and access learning outputs. The Learning Hub was created by using Ipsos Voice, a Socialised Research Platform (SRP) online engagement tool developed by Ipsos.⁸

The Learning Hub site was intended to be open to all eligible grantholders. It was designed to look familiar and meet The Fund's guidelines on branding and accessibility, while also making clear the role of Ipsos MORI and Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in managing the Hub. The site included a landing page that linked through to a sign up and log in page, which also included further information about the Learning Hub and its aims and objectives and an engagement policy for those who signed up.

Once logged in, members were brought to the main Learning Hub page. Standing features included a news carousel containing the latest updates (including links to recent outputs and the page to sign up to upcoming events), a Knowledge Library of learning resources and a blog page (explored further in Chapter 5), and a "Your Discussions Page" (explored further in Chapter 4). Time-limited activities for members to take part in also appeared here and were removed when they were no longer in use (explored further in Chapter 4). Later additions included a "top tags" feature, where members could click through to tagged content.

3.2 The Learning Hub registration process

The email registration process was largely successful, although some grantholders faced technical issues (explored in Section 3.5 below). To invite people to register, email invitations were sent to the "main" and "senior" contacts in the grant application for 13,352 CCSF funded organisations. Invitations were sent by email in three rounds between October 2020 and January 2021. In the invitation email, grantholders were sent an individualised link to sign up, which included a short survey.⁹ The invitation also stated that up to four additional representatives of their organisation could sign up through the open registration process on the website, and these represent the remaining Hub members (see Figure 6 below).

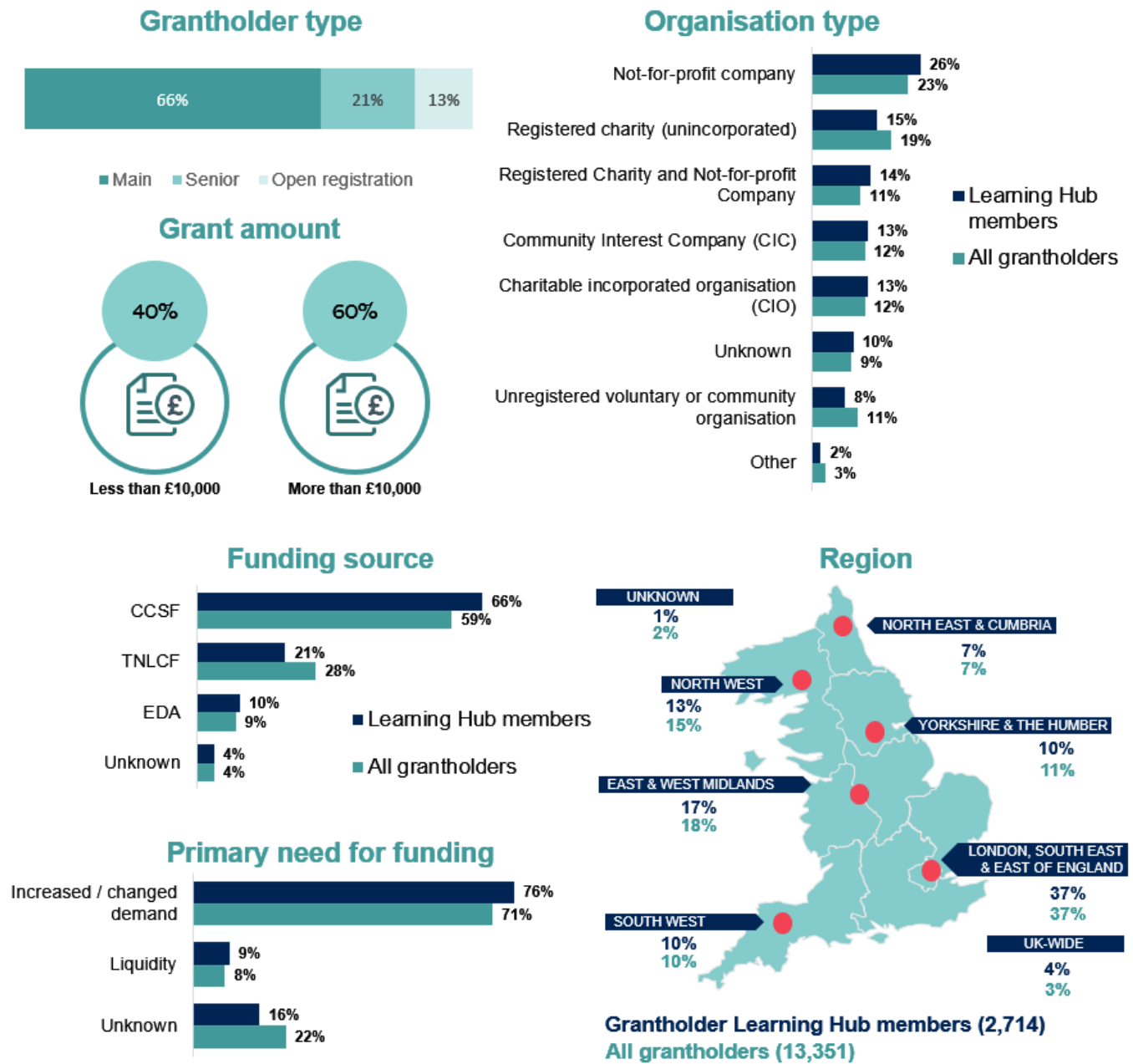
Between October 2020 and July 2021, a total of 3,244 members signed up to the Learning Hub. They represented 2,714 grantholder organisations, one fifth (20%) of all grantholder organisations invited. Key characteristics of registered members are outlined in Figure 6:¹⁰

⁸ The Socialised Research Platform (SRP) is Ipsos's in-house online community platform. The platform was developed by Ipsos and includes custom built research tools for qualitative, quantitative and engagement research.

⁹ The survey asked grantholders where their organisation was located (e.g. North West England); their organisation type (e.g. Not-for-profit company); and the individuals and communities they support.

¹⁰ Appendix A provides a breakdown of the final Learning Hub registration metrics. There is less information about those who registered through the open registration process.

Figure 3.1: Profile of Learning Hub members



Source: the data represented here is based on grantholder organisations contained in the sample shared with Ipsos MORI by The National Lottery Community Fund. Learning Hub Members who registered using the open registration are not included as this data was not collected during the registration process.

We established a system to manage registration issues, including a dedicated email inbox for members to contact, to ensure any problems were resolved quickly. The Ipsos MORI Learning Hub team was flexible in the support offered to grantholders. This included arranging telephone calls to talk through the Learning Hub and how to use it where these were needed.

Grantholders had to verify their account by clicking on a link in an automated verification email. This step was necessary for security, to ensure accounts were set up by the email address holder. The need to verify was highlighted in the final stage of the sign-up process. However, many grantholders who encountered issues with the registration process had either

overlooked the need for this step, or did not receive the email to their inbox (either due to it being caught in a spam filter or an incorrect email address being entered for open registrations). In response, we modified the registration process to be more explicit about members needing to verify their account via email link before they could access the Learning Hub. This was also added as an automatic response to the support email address. In addition, we manually created accounts for 464 of those who registered but did not verify their accounts. This involved providing them with a username and password by email. Learning Hub metrics show that 115 of these grantholders logged in at least once, suggesting that this was a worthwhile step to take.

Due to the potential for people to share sensitive information, terms and conditions of use were developed and shared with grantholders when they signed up. In addition, a Hub moderation approach and escalation policy was developed with a process for addressing any breaches to the terms of use.

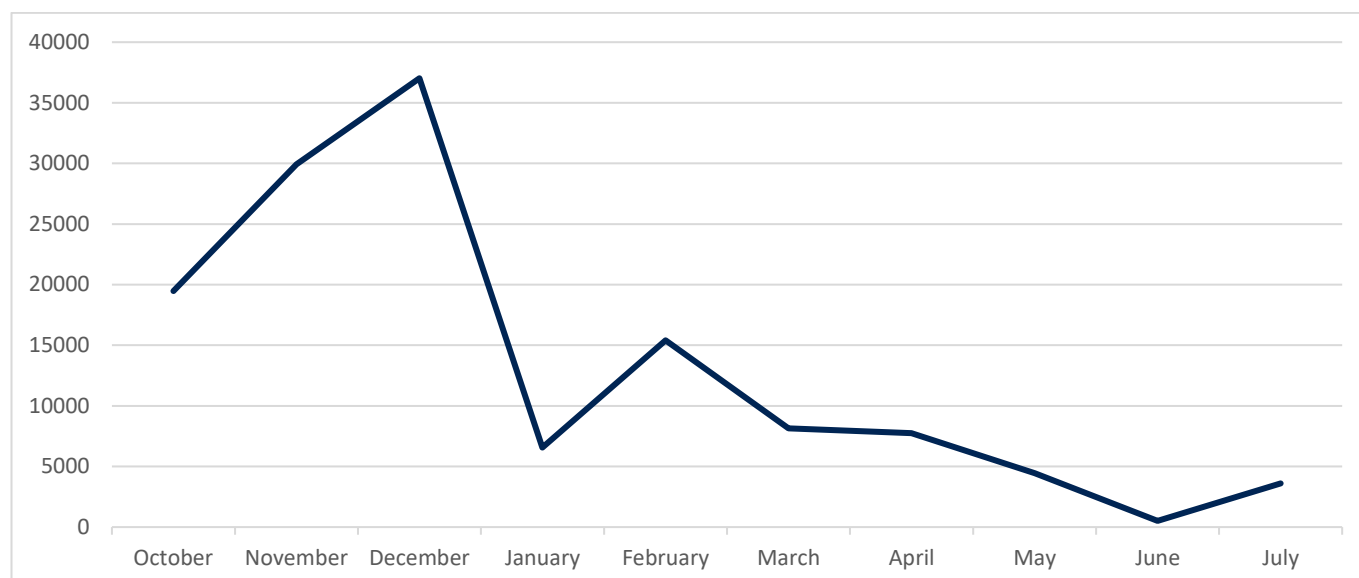
3.3 Engagement with the Learning Hub

Overall engagement with the Learning Hub among members was highest during the initial three months (October to December) and declined over time.¹¹ October and December 2020 saw the highest number of log ins and main page views by members. This was the same period that the first two rounds of invitations to register were sent to grantholders. From February to July 2021, the number of views of the main page declined. The increase between January and early February may reflect an increase in engagement and communication with members during this period. The decline from March may also reflect the end of grant periods, which may have resulted in some temporary staff and volunteers leaving their positions. The slower decline in March and April coincides with the six-month newsletter and launch of the first themed month (see Chapter 4 for more information). During this later period, log-ins were also more likely to represent members returning to the Learning Hub. Figure 7 below shows the total number of main page views over the duration of the Learning Hub.

Maximising engagement on the Hub was an explicit focus for the Learning Strand team. The main changes were to increase email communication with members and send additional reminders of activities between monthly newsletters (explored further in Chapter 5) as well as adapting activities to focus more on networking between members (explored further in Chapter 4).

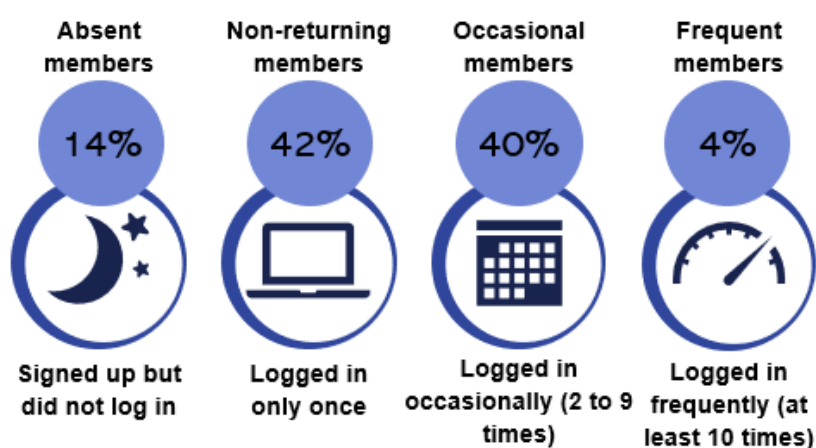
¹¹ Engagement has been examined through the Ipsos Voice metrics on the number of individual logins to the Learning Hub, views of the main page and posts.

Figure 3.2: Monthly Learning Hub homepage views by members



Source: Learning Hub metrics

Looking at Learning Hub engagement by numbers of sign-ins and main page views (demonstrated through metrics collected on the site) also demonstrates different types of engagement with the Learning Hub:¹²



Some members who did not visit the site may however have taken part in other activities (explored in Chapter 4).

The total number of posts made by Learning Hub members further demonstrates this varied level of engagement. Only a small minority (7%) of members contributed through posts and comments on the Learning Hub, with most contributing between one and three times, and a smaller number of occasional or regular contributors (as shown in Table 2 below).

Responses to the final feedback survey also suggests that more members were “passive” consumers of content compared to active contributors: 46% of respondents (110/240) stated

¹² The majority of absent members are likely to reflect the 349 members who had an account manually created for them, as described above. Therefore, the number of members who registered but did not log in is more likely to be around 100.

that they had accessed the Knowledge Library, compared to 11% (26/240) who said they had posted in an online activity. There was no way to measure passive engagement with content through the SRP metrics (for example, page views or content downloads).

Table 3.3: Total number of posts by Learning Hub members

	Learning Hub members (%)
Consumer (0)	3,025 (93%)
Rare contributor (1-3)	168 (5%)
Occasional contributor (4-9)	36 (1%)
Regular contributor (10+)	15 (1%)
Total members	3,244 (100%)

Members sent a total of 90 private messages. We intended that private messaging would be a key feature to encourage networking between members. We sought to increase use by highlighting the feature in newsletters and blogs and also inviting people to get in touch with the Learning Hub team via private message. Despite these changes, take up remained low.

3.4 What we learnt from developing and managing an online Learning Hub

3.4.1 Design of the Learning Hub

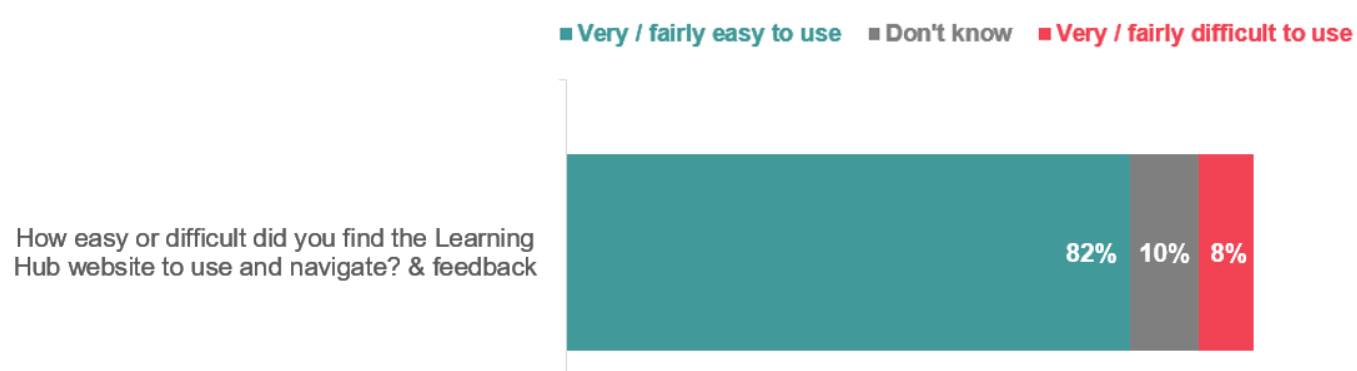
The final feedback survey suggests that the majority of members found the Learning Hub easy to use (83% of respondents). Only 8% found it difficult to use (16/209) (see Figure 3.4 below). However, some open responses and anecdotal feedback indicated that the site was not easy for everyone to navigate (explored further below).

The benefits of using an existing platform (instead of building a new platform from scratch) were that it was cost effective and meant the Learning Hub infrastructure could be set up quickly. This was a key consideration given the timeframe for the project. However, using an existing product also meant that the Learning Hub had to work within the functionality and features already developed within the SRP. Many of the challenges encountered were due to limits on the extent to which existing features and functionality could be adapted to meet the specific aims of the Learning Strand. In particular:

- The SRP platform provided limited site metrics. This meant we were not able to measure passive engagement, for example through examining how many members visited an activity or post. Instead, we used numbers of posts as a proxy for engagement and interest, but this is an imperfect measurement and limited how much confidence we had when assessing the success of different approaches.

- The Learning Strand team received early feedback from the Learning Hub Improvement Group and anecdotal feedback from members that the site was not easily navigable. In particular, some members requested to be able to search the Hub by topic. The introduction of a search feature for members was not possible. Instead, to facilitate greater linking between topics new “widgets” were introduced, including “top tags” that members could click on to access all tagged content on a theme. We also experimented with ordering activities differently, such as temporarily moving different boards “up” so that they are more immediately visible. However, there was no noticeable increase in member engagement as a result of these changes.

Figure 3.4: How easy or difficult members found the Learning Hub to use and navigate



Base: 209 final feedback survey respondents

The creation of a bespoke external landing page meant we were able to clearly introduce the Learning Hub aims and objectives and the terms of engagement to grantholders.

It was not possible to automatically set up the Learning Hub to send email notifications to people when they were tagged in posts, or where a member or moderator responded to a comment. Instead, members had to turn on this feature themselves and consent to receiving these emails. Feedback from members, including from the Learning Improvement Group and final feedback survey, suggests this may have been a helpful way to remind people to return to the site and increase engagement. Members were encouraged to turn on notifications, however we do not know how many did so, and there was no noticeable increase in engagement as a result.

3.4.2 The Learning Hub registration process

Aside from technical issues experienced by some grantholders, the email recruitment approach was largely successful, with reasonable take up from grantholders within a short space of time. The technical support process enabled the Learning Strand team to provide individualised support and prompt resolution of issues.

The main challenge related to the registration process was the need for technical support from the Learning Hub team. A large number of requests for support (over 50 requests a week during the initial registration period) highlighted the need to allocate additional resource during the period when invitations and other communications were sent out. This enabled the Ipsos MORI Learning Hub team to be flexible and responsive in the support offered to grantholders.

Many grantholders had problems verifying their email address throughout registration. This meant these members could not log in until they received support, and it is likely some did not log in or return to the Hub as a result. Though it is not possible to measure the impact of this, after implementing this change there were fewer emails to the inbox with this issue, though this change happened after the largest waves of invites were sent

3.4.3 Engagement with the Learning Hub

The focus on The Fund's guidelines enabled the Learning Strand team to improve the accessibility of the site and implement an Accessibility Policy (see Appendix G). As outlined above, most members found the site easy to use. In open responses, final feedback survey respondents said they liked the design and felt the site was clear and easy to navigate. Some said they liked the bold, bright and cheery colours and valued the interactive nature of the site. A small number of survey respondents (8%) found the site difficult to use and highlighted ways that the accessibility could be improved - such as better signposting between topics and having less information upfront to make the content more digestible.

There were no major issues in terms of risk of harm or reputational risks in relation to how members engaged on the site. The escalation policy was used fewer than five times and not in relation to any serious breaches of the terms and conditions of membership or use of the Learning Hub. This suggests that these processes worked well. The Learning Hub moderation team were responsive to any emerging issues and resolved them promptly, in line with the policy.

However, engagement from members with the Learning Hub site was lower than expected and did not pick up, despite significant efforts to bring members back to the Hub. We have identified a number of contextual factors that may have contributed to this decline over time:

- We know from verbal and written feedback from events and open responses to the final feedback survey that the main reason for not being able to take part in events and activities were capacity and time. The period of decline also corresponded with the gradual easing of lockdown restrictions in England, which we know from wider discussions in events represented a particularly busy period for many members as they adapted their services to resume face to face delivery.
- Most grantholders' grant funding period ended prior to March 2021, meaning that many projects will have concluded at this point. Some individuals may then have moved on to new roles and considered the Learning Hub to be less relevant.

Anecdotally, this may also have been reflected in the increased number of ‘out of office’ emails received in response to email communication with members stating that someone was no longer in post, as well as an increase in invalid email address notifications received, for example in response to newsletters.

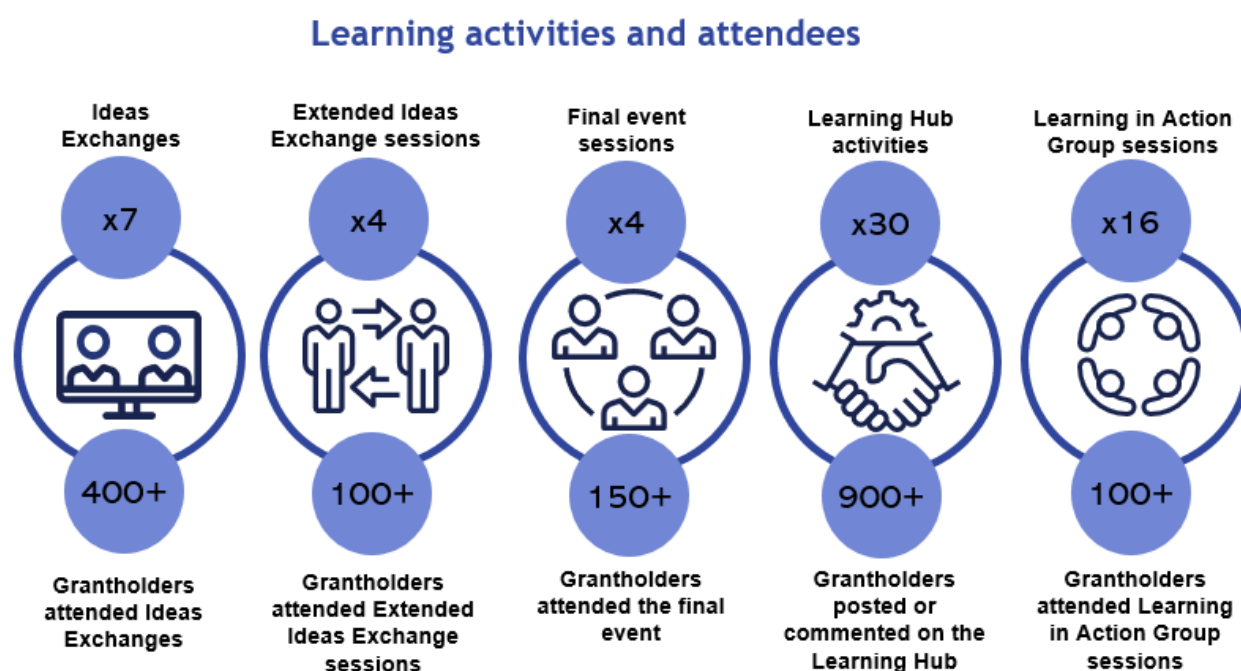
- Metrics demonstrate brief up-ticks in log ins corresponding broadly to when email communications (newsletters and event reminders) were sent out, suggesting that direct communication was helped to remind people to return to the Learning Hub (as opposed to expect people to log in independently). Open responses to the feedback survey also suggested that some members would have valued more direct email engagement to remind them of events and activities taking place. However, it was necessary to balance the amount of email communication to ensure people did not feel overwhelmed and disengage or unsubscribe. The relatively low number of people unsubscribing from email communication (90 members total) suggests we struck a good balance.

In addition, metrics data and final feedback survey responses suggests that some people may feel more comfortable as “passive” browsers of content, while a smaller group are active contributors.

4 Learning activities

This chapter outlines the design of the activities and events delivered as part of the Learning Strand. The chart below provides an overview of all the learning activities delivered. The chapter also describes how the activities changed over time and the level of engagement with activities and events by Hub members. It goes on to explore what we have learned from designing and delivering learning activities.

Figure 9: Overview of learning activities



4.1 Live learning events on Zoom

4.1.1 Design of the live learning events

We held a series of live and facilitated learning events on Zoom (a total of 15 sessions). Registration was open to all Hub members and events were designed to be of interest to as many Hub members as possible. There were two types of events, alongside a final learning event:

- We held **seven Ideas Exchanges** between November 2020 and June 2021. Ideas Exchanges aimed to provide the opportunities for grantholders to share ideas, make connections and discuss issues that mattered to them. The format of each Ideas Exchange was different and included: panel discussions; presentations from grantholders; whole group and breakout-room discussions; ‘playful’ activities (such as drawing to describe experiences and experimenting with Zoom to build connections online); and guest speakers. All Ideas Exchanges focussed on at least one of the themes outlined in Chapter 3. The topic for the first Ideas Exchange was developed by the Learning Hub team together with The Fund, based on our shared understanding of current issues facing the VCSE sector. Subsequent topics were selected from a fortnightly review of ‘hot

topics' emerging from discussions on the Hub and events with grantholders, including the LAGs (outlined in the following sections).

- We held **two Extended Ideas Exchanges** between May and June 2021. Based on the 'test and learn' approach, Extended Ideas Exchanges were designed to replace additional LAGs (see 4.2 below) and aimed to cater to larger numbers of members while also providing greater depth of learning (by taking place over two longer sessions). At the end of the first session of each Extended Ideas Exchange, members voted on ideas to take into the next. During the second session, people worked together to create an output related to the topic under discussion. Extended Ideas Exchanges used an Open Space approach to generate conversations of importance to participants.¹³ Hub members submitted ideas and questions for the first section of the event through an activity on the Learning Hub. During the sessions, attendees could also move between breakout room discussions.
- A **final learning event** took place on 27th July 2021. This was designed to celebrate the achievements of grantholders during the COVID-19 pandemic and to bring members together as the Learning Strand activities ended. There were four separate sessions, each with a different format related to its purpose: one session had a breakout room for grantholders to share what they had achieved; in another, breakout rooms were expert-led to provide a space for strategic planning. We also held a panel discussion on what is next for the VCSE sector. Grantholders could choose to attend one or more of these sessions.

Further details of the topics of events is contained in Appendix E.

4.1.2 Engagement with live learning events

We tested different session lengths and timings to maximise participation in events. Levels of sign-up to the different live events varied:

- Across **Ideas Exchanges**, approximately 60% of those who registered for an event attended on the day;¹⁴
- Similarly, approximately 60% of those who registered attended the first session of the **Extended Ideas Exchanges**. However, only 40% attended the second session.
- At the **final event**, around half of those who registered for a session attended on the day. Around 50 grantholders attended each session.
- In the final feedback survey, members said that their interest in engaging with Learning Strand events was influenced by **access to other support or resources** on the topic. Where they felt they lacked support they were more likely to engage.

¹³ 'Open Space' methodology is an approach to engaging multiple stakeholders around a topic of mutual interest and concern. The method enables those taking part to generate conversations of relevance and importance to them in relation to the topic under discussion. To find out more see here <https://openspaceworld.org/wp2/what-is/>

¹⁴ This is similar to other online events, for example no-show rate of 35% <https://www.markletic.com/blog/virtual-event-statistics/>

All live events were advertised on the Learning Hub and in the monthly Learning Hub member newsletter. For most events, we sent email reminders to members to increase take-up.

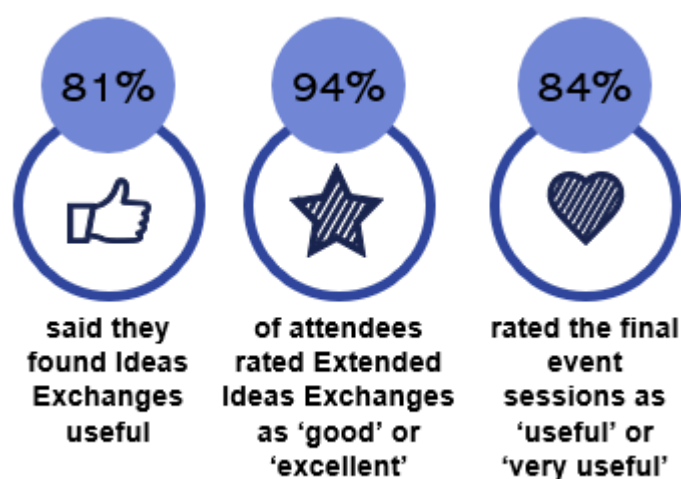
4.1.3 What we learnt from delivering the live learning events

The range of session formats provided different learning experiences to fit the scope and purpose of each session. Attendees valued the variety of different ways of learning, which was reflected in written feedback from the sessions.

“It is always important to be able to talk to other attendees and the breakout sessions are vital.” Grantholder

“These activities help people to think creatively really quickly - people who often tell themselves they're not creative. I am really excited about trying some of these activities in our groups.” Grantholder

People who attended the live events and who took part in post-event polls were positive about their experience (see Appendix E for a full breakdown).



The events provided attendees with the opportunity to network and share experiences, in line with the aims outlined in the engagement framework (described in Chapter 2). In feedback received through post-event polls, comments at the event, and the final feedback survey, Hub members said they enjoyed the opportunities these events provided for networking, sharing experiences, and learning from each other as well as from speakers. Some members also said that they planned to implement what they learned in their organisations.

“I have found it hard to understand what 'theory of change' actually meant but this morning's exercise demonstrated to me that it comes in many guises and is stuff we have been doing... I can see how it will help me and our team for impact reports moving forward.” Grantholder (Ideas Exchange attendee)

Those who attended Extended Ideas Exchanges also said they felt motivated to network with others and share their experiences of the key issues they were grappling with at that time.

“Thank you very much for the platform you have given us to share with other[s]. It gives me the strength to speak about the issues of our small organisation.” Grantholder (Extended Ideas Exchange attendee)

Feedback about the final learning event was also positive, with attendees saying they gained new knowledge as well as enjoying sharing their achievements and what they had learned during the pandemic.

“I am very isolated at work so it has made a difference to meet everyone and be involved.” Grantholder (final learning event attendee)

Developing topics for events based on emerging ‘hot topics’ from the Learning Hub and direct input from grantholders (through voting and the Learning Hub Improvement group) ensured they were relevant to their interests.

Experienced event facilitators with dedicated roles ensured sessions ran smoothly. More specifically, the role included: managing the technical aspects of the event and supporting attendees who were not familiar with Zoom functionalities (e.g. moving from one break-out room to the other); meeting and greeting attendees and supporting late arrivals; and reviewing the Zoom chat function, to acknowledge questions and comments. These roles also ensured that we did not lose time if something unexpected happened (particularly important for the short events).

4.2 Learning in Action Groups

4.2.1 Design of the Learning in Action Groups

Learning in Action Groups (LAGs) provided a new approach to small learning groups grounded in established practice. They aimed to achieve depth of learning over time with a smaller number of participants. The design of the Learning in Action Groups changed over time:

- At the outset of the scoping phase we proposed to deliver this element of the work using Action Learning Sets (ALS).¹⁵ ALS provide small numbers of people an opportunity for depth learning, through working with peers on agreed topics over time. We aimed to deliver eight groups, each with four sessions.
- However, ALS requires people to formally commit to all sessions. During the scoping phase, we decided it was not appropriate to ask grantholders to make this commitment during a crisis, where capacity was limited and project timeframes were short.
- The initial approach was therefore tailored to develop LAGs as an alternative. This included members being encouraged (rather than required) to attend all LAG sessions.
- Another adaptation to the ALS approach was to increase the size of the groups. This sought to address concerns that small groups would not achieve the breadth of

¹⁵ See for example <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/system/files/resources/files/mp49.pdf>

learning needed given the scale of the Learning Strand, as well as to anticipate dropouts over time. As such, we increased the maximum number of participants to 66 (aiming to achieve 40 participants, instead of the original 20). However, while initial attendance was strong, these changes did not achieve consistent attendee numbers as there was drop out between sessions (see section 4.2.2 below).

- In response, we decided to complete the initial four LAGs, but not deliver a planned further four. Instead, these were replaced with Extended Ideas Exchanges (see Section 4.1 above) as part of the Strand's Test and Learn approach.

Each LAG followed one of the four broad themes outlined in Chapter 1. Specific topics for discussion were selected based on the previous session. The intention was to create continuity between sessions and build on ideas.

4.2.2 Engagement with Learning in Action Groups

The LAGs were advertised on the Learning Hub, in the newsletter and in an additional email to all Hub members. Over 200 members registered their interest via email or by signing up on the Learning Hub.

Approximately two-thirds of LAG members who attended the first session returned for the second. This reduced by around half again by the fourth and final sessions.¹⁶ We asked for feedback from those who did not attend LAG sessions, but only limited responses were received. Based on this and wider feedback, we suggest the following factors may have contributed:

- **Timing and length of sessions:** the primary reason people gave for not being able to attend was a lack of time due to other demands and responsibilities. It is possible that the two hour sessions were difficult for people to balance with other commitments, or fit around meetings. In addition, the length between sessions (eight weeks) may have been too far apart to retain engagement and the short-term duration of the funding may have meant that grants had ended or priorities shifted during the crisis.
- **The composition of the group:** for some, the diversity in terms of size and nature of the organisations attending was too broad. Some members felt that this made it more difficult to discuss specific issues and topics which were of interest to them (such as how to address food poverty). As a result, they felt the sessions were not relevant to their needs.

4.2.3 What we learnt from delivering Learning in Action Groups

The LAGs provided a valuable space for a small group of grantholders to reflect on their work and network together. Almost all attendees of the first LAG meetings who provided feedback in the sessions (92%, 85 out of 92) said they enjoyed the sessions and found them useful (see Appendix E for more details).

¹⁶ Between 30 and 40 attended initially, reducing to around 15 at the fourth and final sessions

Members shared numerous examples of what they had learned with colleagues and implemented new practices as a result of learning from the sessions. Examples included:

- Sharing ideas about how to engage staff and volunteers more fully in change processes;
- Undertaking wellbeing surveys of their staff and volunteers, on the suggestion of other members; and
- Trying to more fully understand people who were reluctant to use online video conferencing software, such as Zoom, and find other ways to engage and include them in their work.

Throughout the sessions, members also commented on the importance and value of connecting with each other, feeling part of something bigger and appreciating the reassurance that others had similar struggles.

“I really enjoyed being here, I have learned a lot. You are phenomenal so thanks to being part of you, it has really boosted me up.” Grantholder (LAG member)

“It is good to know we are not alone – that others are thinking and feeling the same, [this] helps keep our motivation up.” Grantholder (LAG member)

The thematic focus enabled a wide variety of people and types of organisations to come together. While for some this was not appropriate, for others this worked well.

“I found this session really useful and so many people from different areas of the country - we can defo take away learnings from this for how we continue services.” Grantholder (LAG member)

There was also space for open discussion. Rather than following a pre-determined agenda, LAGs were more flexible and able to respond to the rapidly changing context of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this may have deterred some members from attending all four sessions, as development of topics across the sessions was less clear.

Private discussion spaces for members of each LAG on the Learning Hub aimed to encourage connections and discussions between sessions. However, these were not used as much as hoped. Instead, there was some indication that LAG members connected with others outside the Learning Hub by exchanging contact details using the chat function during LAG sessions to take conversations further.

The rapidly changing context made it difficult to develop and support our intended continuous learning as originally envisaged. The time between LAGs was also potentially too long and reduced engagement as members could not remember what had been discussed in the previous session. Participants found it difficult to sustain the commitment to attend multiple events.

The LAGs still provided space for members to share their experiences. However, tracking impact would have been difficult to establish and was outside the scope of this work.

A further way to reduce drop out could have been asking for an agreement with members to attend all four LAG sessions. The decision not to include this kind of formal commitment was made to reduce burden and to open the learning opportunities to more grantholders.

4.3 Learning Hub activities

4.3.1 Design of the Learning Hub activities

We designed activities on the Learning Hub site to provide a space for members to share their experiences and facilitate a range of discussion formats, both to generate learning and facilitate networking. These included:

- **Moderated discussion forums** allowed for a more detailed exploration of a particular topic, with follow up prompts from moderators;
- **Contests** enabled participants to suggest and vote for different options (such as a top issue or takeaway);
- A **'Your Discussions' area** on the Hub allowed members to start their own discussion threads on topics important to them and comment on discussions started by other members.

Initially, moderated activities were run on a fortnightly basis. We developed discussions in response to emerging topics of interest from wider learning activities, to prepare for events (for example, asking people to share questions for discussion in an event), or in discussion with The Fund and in response to wider events.

To encourage engagement, facilitate networking and support forward-planning among members, as well as in response to feedback from Learning Improvement Group members, we adapted Learning Hub activities from February 2021. The aim was to give more consideration to how the Hub might be used through different formats, including timed activities and themed months:

- Skills exchange month, regions month, communities month, and reflections month were designed to catch the imagination of members and provide additional reasons to log on and get involved. These months focused on promoting networking between members based on their area, expertise, and the communities they support.
- The updated activity plan also included scheduled, timed online activities. The design of these activities emerged from feedback from members about time pressures and a suggestion that people may find it easier to engage when there is a specific time and place for them to do so.

4.3.2 Moderation approach

We actively moderated content on the Learning Hub. The moderator role aimed to ensure that the Learning Hub remained interesting, relevant and responsive to members. The

moderation approach was outlined in written guidance. We also held weekly, half hour moderator meetings between Ipsos MORI and TIHR to discuss topics and activities and review what had been taking place on the Hub site in the previous week. The moderator role was to:

- Facilitate and guide the discussion, encouraging participants to share insights/ examples from their experience and learn from each other.
- Respond to questions and signpost members to relevant activities or content.
- Keep discussions “on topic” and ensure members felt comfortable on the platform and that they adhere to the principles of engagement.

Moderators posted follow-up probes to encourage members to go beyond purely descriptive accounts of what happened and describe the driving factors behind their experiences (what caused this to happen? What were the barriers to achieving positive outcomes? What enabled a positive outcome?) and the implications (what was the result/ impact?). We also outlined follow up prompts for specific activities, based on areas of interest we identified together with The Fund. Where activities were quiet or members not posting, moderators were encouraged to post broad, open questions to generate discussion on a theme. Moderators avoided “closed” questions (i.e. those that invite a yes or no response).

Due to members not responding to follow-up probes, we amended the moderator guidance to involve a more active approach, whereby moderators sent a direct message to the member thanking them for their contribution, explaining that we would be eager to hear more about their experience and asking them to return to the discussion at their convenience. Moderators were also encouraged to use direct messages to contact members if a post did not abide by the principles of engagement, rather than “call out” someone on the site.

4.3.3 What we learnt from delivering activities on the Learning Hub

The combination of including “top down” (generated by The Fund and other stakeholders) and “bottom up” (generated by grantholders) topics for new activities meant that topics could be generated quickly and were responsive to changing circumstances. However, it also made it more difficult to plan ahead and meant that initially there was more of a focus on generating learning through Hub activities and less focus on networking. The development of thematic months and the engagement framework, developed during the review stage in February 2021 (see Chapter 2 for more information), helped refine the purpose of specific activities.

While activities on the Learning Hub did not lead to the level of desired engagement, members who did engage found them useful. Responses to the feedback survey showed that Learning Hub activities were well received, with over a third of respondents who used the Hub (36%, 64 out of 176) indicating that they found it ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ useful. Only 7% (12 out of 176) said they found it ‘not very’ or ‘not at all’ useful.

“The Learning Hub gave us the opportunity to think about key themes and share ideas. This is sometimes difficult to organise. I found the website an easy way to engage in ideas. You can come back to the subject and discussions. Look at what other actors are thinking. It is a great way to really connect and be part of something bigger.” Grantholder (Final feedback survey)

Similar to other events, the main reasons members gave for not engaging with Learning Hub online activities in the final feedback survey were a lack of time and competing priorities. Some said that this meant they prioritised accessing learning outputs, rather than contributing their own experiences on the Hub. Some mentioned other networks and online funder programmes that they were involved in and feeling over-burdened by the number of online events and activities that took place during the pandemic. However, others felt the topics discussed on the Hub were too broad and therefore not relevant to their organisation.

“Purely time [the Learning Hub] came at a time when activities were being restated and workload was high. Would participate in future.” Grantholder (Final feedback survey)

The updated activities (themed months and timed activities) also did not result in a noticeable increase in engagement. Given feedback from members about the desire to network and connect on more specific themes, it is possible that anticipating this approach earlier may have resulted in more sustained engagement over time. However, the context of the pandemic made this difficult.

Some final feedback survey respondents suggested that more frequent reminders about activities (weekly or fortnightly) or email notifications may have prompted members to return to the Hub and take part in activities. More grantholders did join the scheduled, timed online activities that were advertised in the newsletter and email that Hub members were able to sign up for.

Where members did engage with activities, comments were not always relevant to the questions posed in the activities. It was also difficult to generate a lively discussion through the online activity boards. Most appeared to be most comfortable posting descriptive content about their work, rather than responding to more analytical probes to generate insights (i.e. what worked well or less well and why, or what could be improved).

Written guidance, reviewed regularly, ensured that moderators were aware of their responsibilities and suggestions for improvements could be incorporated. The more direct approach of moderators following up with a direct private message also saw more members returning to post in activities. However, moderators did not always receive a response. Holding weekly meetings for Ipsos MORI and TIHR moderators provided a forum for discussing queries, issues and suggestions for improvements for Learning Hub activities.

5 Learning outputs

This chapter outlines the learning outputs that were produced as part of the Learning Strand. We describe the different outputs produced and what we changed during the delivery. We also explore what worked well and less well.

5.1 Design of learning outputs

Learning outputs were intended to contribute to practical, applicable learning for a range of audiences, including grantholders, The Fund, DCMS and policy audiences. The aim of outputs was also to increase engagement with the Learning Hub, as all outputs were hosted in a Knowledge Library on the Hub.

The Learning Strand team produced



5.1.1 Learning Hub blogs

Learning Hub blogs were designed to be short written pieces, providing updates for members, reflections from activities and ideas for new topics. These existed within a designated “blog” area of the Learning Hub. Members also had the opportunity to comment on blogs. We published 11 blogs between October 2020 and July 2021. These included:

- **Short descriptive articles** highlighting future activities or findings from activities that had taken place; and
- **Ideas Exchange blogs** sharing headline findings from activities and signposting readers to more detailed learning outputs in the Knowledge Library.

5.1.2 Knowledge library resources

We developed a range of resources that focused on sharing learning from various activities with wider Hub members. These were uploaded to a dedicated Knowledge Library on the Learning Hub and included:

- **Showcases:** initially these were intended as ‘snapshots’ to showcase the work of a particular organisation in a written or video format (a total of 14). They developed to focus on learning on a specific topic.
- **Outputs from Ideas Exchanges:** these varied in format and included resources framed around top tips from the sessions and activity guides (a total of six).
- **Outputs from Extended Ideas Exchanges:** working groups created nine visual depictions of key messages generated during the events.
- **Outputs from LAGs:** outputs from each LAG session (16 total) outlined key learning as well as the direction of the discussion.
- **Learning Reports:** these brought together the learning from each Learning Hub theme across the different activities. While initially envisaged as short, four-page ‘learning digests’, the focus became to extract useful, deeper learning that would be relevant for the future (a total of 4). The learning reports are available on TNLCF website.¹⁷
- **Videos/podcasts:** these were originally intended to be short presentations of key learning or interviews with ‘experts’ or grantholders. Videos were then designed to be part of the Showcases. In addition, animations were created to provide a summary of the Learning Reports in a visual and audio format, for greater accessibility (a total of 4). The animations are available on TNLCF website.¹⁸
- **Signpost Guides:** these were added to the portfolio of outputs to provide brief summaries of key resources on selected topics (a total of 2).

The Knowledge Library was the repository for all learning outputs. Over time, the Knowledge Library became a key part of the Learning Hub and one of the main reasons for members to visit the site. The design of the Knowledge Library allowed members to sort articles by theme and resource type, to help them find those relevant to them. There were no user metrics available for how many Hub members in total accessed the Knowledge Library. However, out of the 240 members who completed the final feedback survey, just under half (46%) said they had accessed the Knowledge Library or read an article or resources.

5.1.3 Learning Hub newsletters

We planned that the monthly newsletters would provide a summary of Learning Strand activities taking place and tell members and wider grantholders about how they could get involved. Originally, the intention was also to share emerging learning with members.

¹⁷ CCSF evaluation outputs can be found on The National Lottery Community Fund website via this link:

<https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/insights/covid-19-resources/responding-to-covid-19/ccsf-grantholder-evaluation>

¹⁸ Ibid.

However, this would have added considerably to the length of the newsletter, which we felt may reduce engagement.

Between November 2020 and September 2021, we sent nine newsletters to Learning Hub members. In addition, we sent a newsletter to wider grantholders in Spring 2021 to remind them about the Learning Hub and encourage them to sign up.

5.2 What we learnt from developing learning outputs

The iterative nature of the Learning Strand allowed us to respond to what we heard from grantholders about their needs and led to introduction of additional types of outputs, such as Signpost Guides.

The range of formats accommodated grantholders' different learning preferences. Open responses from members in the final feedback survey highlighted that members had varied learning preferences: some said they preferred video showcases, while others preferred written outputs. Comments from the final feedback survey further suggested that grantholders preferred shorter content. Experimenting with different formats and reaching a shared understanding of the purpose of each output took time.

"I particularly like the Showcases and how informative they are but quick and easy to read or watch. I also like the top tips style of the Ideas Exchange outputs. I think that smaller sections are easier to engage with when short on time." Grantholder (Final feedback survey respondent)

In addition, analytical outputs were resource intensive and took time to produce. This was because the flexible, discursive format of discussions in LAG sessions and Ideas Exchanges made it difficult to extract structured learning points at speed. As a result, we did not upload and share outputs as quickly as we had intended and were unable to provide learning to all Hub members in 'real-time'.

Overall, members found the Knowledge Library useful. Almost three quarters of respondents to the final feedback survey (72%, 125/174) said they found the Knowledge Library useful, compared to 5% who said it was not useful (9/174).¹⁹

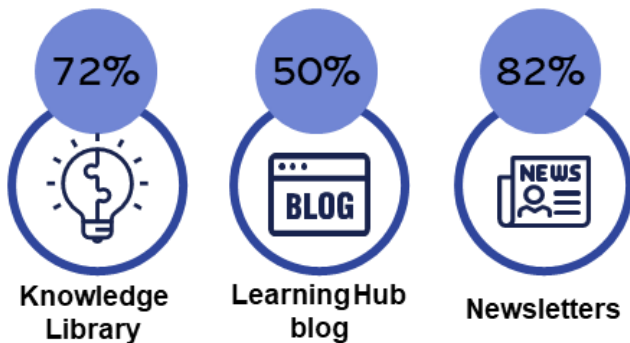
"I think the content is really clear and well organised and I have shared many articles and links with others in my organisation so the learning has been cascaded. I find articles on topics that can be searchable over time a really useful resource which I hope will remain live." Grantholder (Final feedback survey respondent)

Half of final feedback survey respondents (50%, 84/167) stated that they found the blogs and associated posts useful. This compares to 11% who said they did not find them useful

¹⁹ This is based on the subset of the final feedback survey sample who said they had visited the Learning Hub and/or joined at least on the Learning Strand activities.

(18/167). This is lower than the Knowledge Library, suggesting the learning-focused outputs were more useful for grantholders.

Usefulness of the learning outputs



“The learning outputs shared have helped us to develop with confidence some of the methods used by other groups to engage their communities or service users.”

Grantholder (Final feedback survey respondent)

Newsletters were well received by members and the format was an effective way to share updates. With only 90 members asking to unsubscribe from newsletters and email communications in total, this suggests that members were generally happy to receive updates this way. In addition, a high proportion of final feedback survey respondents said they found the newsletters useful (82%, 144/175).

6 Key learning from the process

In the table below, we outline what we set out to achieve from the Learning Strand, what we tried and our recommendations for running a similar learning programme in future.

Report summary	
<p>What we set out to achieve</p>	<p>The Fund’s vision was to help grantholders navigate through the COVID-19 crisis by providing online learning and networking activities. These activities were intended to identify and share grantholders’ ways of working, including what grantholders found useful, the barriers they faced, and what they planned to continue to do (or stop doing) in the future. The aim was to share, test and debate learning among grantholders and more widely.</p> <p>To meet these aims, we proposed creating a virtual space for grantholders to meet and share their experiences, generating insights in the process. Learning activities and outputs aimed to provide systematic methods to capture, store and share knowledge appropriate to the needs of grantholders.</p>
<p>What we tried</p>	<p>We designed and delivered a range of activities and outputs to meet the aims of the Learning Strand and the diverse needs of grantholders:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We created an online Learning Hub platform using Ipsos Voice, an existing online engagement tool developed by Ipsos and designed to meet The Fund’s branding and accessibility guidelines. • On the Learning Hub, we delivered over 30 activities. We also created a ‘Your Discussions’ space for members to create their own topics and engage with other grantholders. Activities evolved as the Learning Strand progressed, leading to the introduction of thematic months and scheduled, timed online activities. • We delivered 15 live learning events on Zoom where grantholders shared ideas, made connections and discussed topics of importance to them. We also held a final learning event to celebrate the achievements of grantholders. • We delivered four Learning in Action Groups (LAGs) to allow a smaller group of people to meet to discuss a topic over time. <p>From these activities, we created written and video outputs and uploaded them to a Knowledge Library on the Learning Hub. Events and outputs were shared with members through a monthly newsletter.</p>

What we achieved

- We generated useful learning about how to design networking and learning activities during a crisis. Particularly, how to develop a learning system at pace, while incorporating the views and needs of grantholders and building in flexibility to respond to a changing context.
- We implemented a successful email recruitment approach, with one in five grantholders (20%) registering for an account.
- We provided responsive and individualised technical support to resolve registration issues promptly.
- We designed and implemented a clear accessibility policy that helped members engage with online learning activities.
- We designed and implemented a comprehensive escalation policy that mitigated risks of harm and reputational risks and ensured any issues were addressed promptly.
- We learnt that promoting sustained engagement with online learning activities from a large group of people requires careful consideration of the audience's capacity and learning needs. Our experience suggests that some people may feel more comfortable as "passive" browsers of content, while a smaller group are active contributors.
- We gave grantholders the opportunity to network and share experiences through online and offline events.
- We provided a wide range of learning activity formats that enabled us to explore different topics and adapt to grantholders' diverse learning needs. Developing topics from direct and indirect input from grantholders also helped to ensure they were relevant to different needs and interests.
- We ensured sessions ran smoothly through using experienced event facilitators with dedicated roles.
- Through Learning in Action Groups, we provided a space for a smaller group of people to reflect together delivering support during a crisis and provide reassurance to one another, as well as experiment with new ways of working and planning.
- We developed diverse, iterative and responsive written and video outputs that remained relevant to grantholders in a fast-changing context and accommodated grantholders' different learning preferences.

Our recommendations for the future

Designing a future learning programme

- While there were constraints on time for planning and scoping as a result of the pandemic context, a clear conceptual framework agreed with stakeholders would help to identify and understand any assumptions held about learning needs, modes of engagement and level of confidence using technology. This would help to inform the design and identify potential challenges. An evaluation framework would help describe the evidence that can be captured to understand whether shared outcomes have been achieved and guide the design of activities. Similarly, a Theory of Change would articulate audience needs and the aims activities are trying to achieve.
- Involving more grantholders in the early development may support the creation of an online community and provide opportunities for co-production, which is likely to increase engagement.
- Our experience demonstrated the importance of building in time for reflection and making sense of information, even when working in real-time and at pace. By doing so, we were able to adapt the approach in real-time and try out new ways to engage grantholders.

Developing and managing a future learning platform

- Using an off-the-shelf, existing product supports delivery at pace. However, a bespoke learning platform would allow greater tailoring to the audience and may increase the relevance for the audience.
- Member registration can work well by email. Nonetheless, consideration must be given to the digital skills of the audience and likely need for support.
- Direct emails work well to keep members updated and engaged.
- Embedding the use of a new technology or platform takes time and requires building familiarity of the platform and a sense of community.

Designing and delivering learning activities and outputs

- An overall programme of activities should consider the breadth and depth of learning, i.e. being broad enough to engage a wide audience, but specific enough to appear relevant.
- Designing a diverse set of activities and outputs (e.g. written and visual) accommodates individual learning needs and preferences.