

Evaluation of the Dormant Assets NI Phase One Grant Programme

**Supporting the capacity, resilience and
sustainability of the voluntary, community and
social enterprise sector in Northern Ireland**

Final evaluation report: executive summary



Executive Summary

This is the Executive Summary of the full evaluation report of the Dormant Assets NI Phase One Programme; the [full final evaluation report](#) is available.

Introduction

1. The aim of Dormant Assets NI is to support the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector in Northern Ireland (NI) to be more resilient and prepared for the future, by funding activity that increases capacity and sustainability. Dormant Assets NI is delivered by The National Lottery Community Fund. Dormant Assets NI funded a Phase One Grant Programme (hereafter referred to as the 'Grant Programme'), in which 244 organisations received grant funding totalling £19.9m. The Grant Programme ran from January 2021 until March 2023, and grant-funded projects will be delivered until 2027.
2. In November 2023, SQW (an independent research consultancy) was commissioned by The National Lottery Community Fund to undertake an evaluation of the Grant Programme. This is a summary of the findings of the evaluation.
3. This summary explores the emerging evidence of how the Grant Programme is contributing to improving the resilience of the VCSE sector in NI, setting out what is working in delivering and achieving outcomes. It draws on online surveys and semi-structured interviews with grant holders, unsuccessful applicants and other stakeholders. It also draws on programme management data and seven case studies with grant funded organisations. Insights from across all three waves of data collection and evaluation activity have fed into the development of this final evaluation report.
4. This report contains insights and learning that will be relevant for The National Lottery Community Fund, its stakeholders, policy makers and funders, but also for VCSE organisations, including those funded via the Grant Programme. It concludes with a set of recommendations for The National Lottery Community Fund, other funders, and others with a role to play in supporting the sector. Learning from the evaluation has also been used to inform a separate guide aimed at VCSE organisations. The case studies ([Evaluation case studies: Learning from grant recipient organisations](#)) and guide ([From Surviving to Thriving: Insights on Building VCSE organisational Capacity and Sustainability](#)) are also available.

Key findings

The programme has been delivered against the backdrop of a challenging VCSE sector in NI, and grant holders applied for funding to address challenges such as generation and diversification of income, and limited time and resource for strategic planning.

5. The programme has been delivered against the backdrop of a challenging VCSE sector in NI, including issues related to:
 - The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic (and related disruptions to funding and delivery, as well as increased demand for services)
 - The cost-of-living crisis
 - Political uncertainty, Brexit and the collapse of the NI executive
 - A competitive funding landscape and short-term, restricted funding available to VCSE organisations
 - Issues with recruitment and retention across the sector
6. Grant holders applied to the Grant Programme for a number of reasons. The most common challenge reported by grant holders was generating and diversifying income, especially for those who received funding later in the programme. Limited time and resources for strategic planning and a lack of skills, confidence, or capabilities were also common challenges.
7. Similar challenges were identified by unsuccessful applicants surveyed. Consistent with the findings from the grant holders' survey, generating/diversifying their income sources was the most commonly reported challenge.
8. Reasons for applying for the Grant Programme as opposed to other funding sources included the focus on strategic activities (rather than projects) and the flexibility of the grant to take advantage of emerging opportunities. The timing and context of the programme was also reported to be important.

The Grant Programme funded a range of activities, including income diversification, recruitment of new staff, and improvements to digital capacity or digitising process and materials; grant holders reported a range of enablers in delivering these activities but also a number of barriers.

9. The Grant Programme was used to fund a range of activities. Generating and diversifying their income streams was the most frequently reported activity by grant holders across all three waves of the survey. Qualitative insights suggest this spanned both commercial opportunities and broadening public sector partnerships. Grant holders also commonly reported activities relating to the recruitment of new staff and improving digital capacity or digitising processes and materials.
10. In terms of progress, the survey evidence also indicates that the majority of grant holders have delivered, or will deliver, their grant funded activities as planned. Further, programme monitoring data shows that the majority of projects have retained their original delivery timelines.

11. Key enablers to delivery of grant funded activities included bringing in required skills to support with delivery, increasing internal capacity to deliver activities, and involving existing staff, volunteers or partners in the delivery of grant-funded activities. The flexibility of the Grant Programme and support from The National Lottery Community Fund Funding Officers were also reported to be key enablers.
12. The key commonly reported challenge that affected the delivery of grant funded activities was recruitment and staff retention. Some grant holders found it difficult to manage internal capacity and resource constraints when delivering a timebound project; external contextual factors also impacted the delivery of activities for some grant holders.

Grant holders achieved a range of outcomes as a result of the Dormant Assets funding; commonly, grant holders reported greater staff knowledge, skills and confidence as a result of their grant funded activities, as well as new ways of working and new income streams.

13. Almost all grant holders engaged with reported that they had achieved organisational change and impact as a result of the Grant Programme. Most commonly, grant holders reported greater staff knowledge, skills and confidence as a result of their grant funded activities, as well as new ways of working and new income streams. The outcomes achieved varied to some extent by organisation characteristics, including organisation size and geography.
14. Nearly a third of grant holders reported that they had achieved some unanticipated outcomes, typically in the scale of outcomes achieved rather than the nature of the outcomes themselves.
15. A number of internal and external factors were reported to have influenced the achievement of outcomes. Internal organisational factors (including organisational leadership and management buy-in, and having relevant strategies and action plans in place) were commonly identified as having positively influenced their ability to achieve outcomes, followed by engagement with The National Lottery Community Fund.
16. In contrast, factors external to the organisations' control (such as broader socio-economic conditions and the political climate) were deemed to have had the greatest negative influence on their ability to deliver grant funded activities and/or to achieve outcomes.
17. More than two-thirds of respondents said that they would have not been able to achieve these outcomes without the grant, and all remaining respondents felt they would not have achieved them to the same scale, timeliness or quality.
18. Respondents highlighted the Grant Programme's focus on building organisational capacity, sustainability and resilience, and suggested that, without the Grant Programme, there would have been limited opportunities to invest in activities relating to building their organisation's overall strategy and operations.

19. Evidence from grant holders indicates how Dormant Assets funding has improved capacity, resilience and sustainability in the sector. The routes to which these have been achieved are diverse, but include reduced reliance on funders, more productive and efficient ways of working, more well-established operational and strategic plans, as well as enhanced relationships, networks and organisational profile. Combined, these outcomes are expected to strengthen grant holders' ability to adapt and evolve in response to future opportunities and challenges.
20. Most grant holders engaged felt that the Grant Programme had resulted in transformational change for their organisation; it had provided the opportunity to do something different to their usual operations, and access to opportunities not previously possible due to either limited finances or time constraints.
21. However, some organisations remained wary as to whether they would become wholly sustainable and resilient following their funded project, highlighting changes to future funding and the availability of staff and volunteers as key factors which will ultimately determine the extent of their sustainability in the longer-term.

Next steps

22. The Grant Programme has enabled the delivery of a wide range of projects across a diverse set of organisations in NI. This evaluation has found that it has contributed to the capacity, resilience and overall sustainability of these organisations, and is supporting the sector more widely on its journey towards resilience. It has been successful in generating outcomes and impacts for VCSE organisations in receipt of grant funding, with almost all grant holders reporting that they had achieved outcomes as a result of the funding they received.
23. However, looking to the future, there remain a number of challenges and opportunities on the horizon for the VCSE sector in NI. There are existing and persistent issues, such as reduced government spending and annualised/short term pots of funding being made available for VCSE sectors, but also new and emerging challenges and opportunities.

We have set out a series of recommendations for supporting the capacity, resilience and sustainability of the VCSE in NI. These are aimed at The National Lottery Community Fund and other funders, as well as policy makers and others with a role to play in supporting the sector, and are available in full in the conclusions section of the [full final evaluation report](#).

As noted above, a guide aimed at VCSE organisations is available: [From Surviving to Thriving: Insights on Building VCSE organisational Capacity & Sustainability](#).

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