



# **Building capacity in individuals and communities: the value of funding small community projects**

**Learning from the ESF community grants programme, 2011-13**

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*NCVO Research Paper, January 2014*

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# it's our community

This research was commissioned in 2013 as part of NCVO's 'it's our community' project with the financial support of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. The 'it's our community' project is supported by both the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and European Social Fund Technical Assistance funds



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## Contents

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### Acknowledgements

#### Section 1: Introduction

p1

- About the *It's our Community* project
- About ESF Community Grants
- About this research

#### Section 2: Delivery of regional community grants programmes

p3

- Programme management arrangements
- Reaching out to small organisations
- Organisations and activities funded
- Supporting organisations to deliver

#### Section 3: Project achievements and outcomes

p14

- Engaging disadvantaged groups
- Achieving positive outcomes for individuals
- Achieving positive outcomes for community organisations
- Achieving positive outcomes for communities

#### Section 4: Learning

p24

- The value and strengths of small community-based projects
- Case examples
- Challenges and enablers
- Ideas for improving future community grants programmes

#### Section 5: Conclusions

p42

#### Appendix: Sample and dataset

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## *Acknowledgements*

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We would like to thank all the contributors to this research and most notably the Grants Managers from regional Grants Co-ordinating Bodies who generously shared their time, their knowledge and their learning

- Tina Costello, Heart of England Community Foundation (West Midlands)
- Natalie Thompson, Humber Learning Consortium (Yorkshire & Humber)
- Jackie Bruder, Surrey Community Action (South East)
- Ian McHugh, Workers Educational Association (North West)
- Jan Crawley, South West Foundation (South West)
- Mel Phythian, Enable – Voluntary Action Centre (East Midlands)
- Dominic Wade, The Consultancy Home Counties (East of England)
- Jamie Murden, Cornwall Development Company (Cornwall and the Scilly Isles)
- Christina Rackley, County Durham Community Foundation (North East)

We would also like to thank those who helped us develop case studies to bring to life some of our key points about the value of funding small organisations to make a difference to the most disadvantaged in their local community:

- Guildford Job Club (<http://www.guildfordjobclub.org.uk>)
- GAP Unit, Manchester (<http://www.gapunit.org>)
- SHIFT Herefordshire (<http://www.carefarm.co.uk>)
- SilenceBreakers Media (<http://silencebreakers.org>)
- Deaf to Work (<http://www.deaf2work.co.uk>)

John Hacking at the European Funding Network also provided us with helpful advice and information (<http://www.europeanfundingnetwork.eu>).

Finally we would like to thank the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation for their support for the '*Its our Community*' Project and for this research.

## Section 1: Introduction

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### 1.1 About the 'It's our Community' project

NCVO's '*It's our Community*' project has been supported by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation to share learning about what works in delivering community-led solutions to local needs. The project has involved a 'research' element - identifying good practice via desk research, interviews and workshops; and a 'dissemination' element - using a website, resources and events to share learning across community organisations and with policy-makers. Throughout the life of the project the 'Its our Community' (IoC) team has been interested in understanding the value of funding small community organisations to deliver services, and in particular to better understand their role and value in delivering services in disadvantaged communities to individuals and groups often deemed "hard to reach".

For the last seven years a portion of European Social Fund (ESF) funding has been distributed through the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) in England via a **Community Grants programme** - supporting small organisations to engage those furthest from the workforce and help them move closer to the labour market. With the latest tranche of Community Grants funding coming to an end (2011-13) the IoC project saw an opportunity to draw together learning and reflections about what works in delivering locally-focused community projects from a rich data source – the experience of the organisations funded via the Community Grants programme.

### 1.2 About ESF Community Grants

The Community Grants programme has been delivered across England through regional grant co-ordinating bodies (GCBs). Compared to other ESF funding programmes, Community Grants are smaller pots of money (up to £12,000) with a simplified application process. The intention was that grants should reach civil society organisations that work with people furthest away from the labour market, and that the funded organisations should deliver soft outcomes for those people such as improving confidence/ self-esteem, and developing a range of soft skills linked to employability.

A further 19-months funding has been allocated for the continuation of community grants programmes from January 2014. Beyond this time, however, and for any future funding rounds to 2020, ESF structural funds will be delivered by Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) – who can choose whether or not to maintain a community grants programme.

### 1.3 About this research

This research aimed to increase understanding of the value (and challenges) of funding small community projects, and to identify learning that might usefully inform discussions about the continuation of community grants or similar funding programmes in the longer-term. We hoped to address the following key questions:

- **Achievements and value:** What has been achieved by organisations funded through the programme? What difference have projects made to disadvantaged individuals and communities? What value have regional grants bodies identified in funding small organisations to engage with the most disadvantaged?
- **Learning:** What can be learnt about what works in delivering community projects aimed at those experiencing disadvantage? What have been the factors that have enabled successful delivery and what have been the barriers?

We were clear from the outset that our intention was to draw together a broad overview of learning across the regions rather than to produce a formal evaluation. With limited resources and a short turnaround time for our research we sought to use available data as far as possible, supplementing this with interviews of grants managers and a small sample of project leads. Our hope was to draw together data about programme delivery in the 2011-13 funding round across all regions except London, where the approach to funding has been different. Our research involved the following activities:

**Step 1: analysis of existing data.** We collected together existing data from regions to enable us to conduct a ‘mapping’ and analysis – to help us understand what has been funded and with what results. Using online searches and follow-up contact with grant managers we sought out project lists and descriptions; monitoring data/reports; and completed evaluation reports where available.

**Step 2: qualitative interviewing.** We undertook in-depth telephone interviews with grant managers focused on their learning and projects’ achievements.

**Step 3: case exemplars.** We collected together short exemplars of projects whose work showcased success, learning and/or innovation. These were based largely on existing data and/or case studies previously submitted to regional programme managers, but also involved some follow-up interviewing with project leads.

We made contact with all nine target regions via email and telephone, and eight of the nine responded and felt able to participate within our timeframe either by sharing existing data and/or by taking part in an interview. Because our fieldwork period – mid-November to mid-December - clashed with a number of reporting and audit processes and deadlines for grants managers, this made participation difficult for some, and meant that one region, though supportive of the research, was simply unable to participate or share information in our timeframe. Our findings therefore reflect the perspectives and views of only a sample of grant managers.

In addition, the data we were able to access in relation to funded projects was incomplete - we found some variety in the type of data held on projects, performance and outcomes, and in the degree to which regional data had been sorted, aggregated or analysed. In most regions final figures had not yet been compiled for End of Contract Reports (a Skills Funding Agency/ESF requirement) and/or for external evaluation purposes. Appendix 1 – *Sample and Limitations*, gives further details of regions’ engagement with the research, and the data we were able to access.

## Section 2: Delivery of regional community grants programmes

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### 2.1 Programme management arrangements

#### Key findings:

The Grant Co-ordinating Bodies (GCBs) and individual grants managers have usefully brought significant learning from their prior experience to the programme. The effective management of the programme has also relied in part on strong partnership work. In most regions this has included subcontracting out different elements of delivery to local partners with good local knowledge and a closer relationship with the target organisations and communities.

The majority of the GCBs had prior experience of managing community grants and/or other ESF grants programmes from at least 2007, with some managing community grants as far back as 2002 (under the ESF Global Grants Programme) and/or other ESF programmes going back to the mid-1990s. Interview respondents suggested this as a factor in enabling them to deliver a programme described as “complex” and “very time-consuming” in comparison to other programmes.

***“We’ve been involved since the time of global grants. You find each time you take on a contract you can build in the learning from the previous time so that things are continuously improving.”*** (regional grants manager)

***“It does take a lot of time to manage. It’s a very complex programme with layers of requirements and frameworks to consider as well as our own internal processes and systems”*** (regional grants manager)

In each region the management of the programme relied heavily on partnership working, and in most regions on formal subcontracting arrangements for the delivery and management of the programme to a more local level. In some regions partners were most actively involved in steering the work and sitting on assessment panels, in others partners were either delivering and managing the programme in a devolved, more local way, and/or delivering a supporting capacity-building programme.

***“Between us and our partners we have a strong, established relationship and that’s been vital to the success of the programme. We couldn’t deliver without them. They bring a lot of local knowledge and credibility with the organisations in their area.”*** (regional grants manager)

***“One of the main benefits of a devolved funding model has been the sharing of best practice amongst delivery agents.”*** (independent evaluator of regional programme)

## 2.2 Reaching out to small organisations

### Key findings:

Grant Co-ordinating Bodies invested considerable effort in promoting the programme widely to enable take-up from the target organisations. They used local partnerships; varied promotional routes; a supportive application process; and a rigorous assessment process to ensure good access to organisations working with disadvantaged groups and to minimise risks inherent in funding previously unknown/un-funded groups. As far as possible they sought to strike a balance between being both funder and enabler. Though we found limited evidence of grantee feedback on application processes, what evidence does exist suggests high levels of satisfaction.

Grant Managers and local teams put considerable effort into raising awareness of the programme and making it accessible to the target organisations; that is, small local organisations working in disadvantaged communities and/or with disadvantaged groups – many of whom are deemed hard to reach and/or ‘below the radar’ of other funding programmes. The success of GCBs in reaching these organisations was reflected in a very high level of demand from organisations meeting the essential funding criteria, with most regions reporting being oversubscribed by anything upwards of 50% to 100% above the available funding.

***“We felt we had to design a programme that didn’t just let people through who were good at filling in application forms but that actually got to the groups that this programme was intended to reach.”*** (regional grant manager)

***“We were quite heavily oversubscribed, I don’t know exactly but maybe by 50% again of those who were successful. Those who were turned down it wasn’t because they were the wrong type of organisation so I think we did very well at reaching those we wanted to.”*** (regional grant manager)

We identified a number of activities and approaches most commonly adopted to ensure that grants were made available to the target organisations. These were:

- Extensive partnership working
- Proactive and targeted publicity and outreach using a range of methods
- Developing a supported application process
- A thoughtful and robust assessment process
- Intensive early-stage or ‘start-up’ support.

### 2.2.1 Partnership working

Partnership working has been key to the effective promotion of the programme and to the assessment of applications in all regions. Grant Managers report not just relying on their existing networks, though these were generally substantial, but working through intermediary bodies very closely to promote through their networks also. Within

application processes working with partners was recognised as an important, useful way to add capacity, knowledge and expertise, and to ensure a degree of objectivity that added value to the programme's management.

***“We have built up quite a group of people who've been on the panels with quite a lot of expertise so we've had this pool of about 40 people we've trained so it's been good making use of their expertise and their knowledge.” (regional grant manager)***

### **2.2.2 Proactive promotion**

The GCBs used a range of methods to reach the target types of organisation, taking active steps to target in any areas or for any types of organisation identified as under-represented or as not taking up the opportunity. Methods included:

- using email and newsletter mailing lists of local infrastructure organisations, public sector partners, community foundations, etc.;
- developing targeted publicity and using websites and social media;
- face-to-face contact via outreach, seminar and workshop programmes and attendance at relevant events such as Meet the Funder workshops.

In each region when asked to consider the most effective method of reaching out, Grants Managers identified face-to-face contact as the most effective and valuable, and in some regions it was clear it had helped with targeting to ensure equality of access and reach into the most disadvantaged areas. For instance, in Yorkshire and Humber, Meet the Funder events in partnership with a local funding bureau proved an effective way to target areas of lower take-up, and in the East Midlands outreach and events were specifically directed in particular areas as a decision was taken to target the programme into the most deprived areas in the region from the start so that funding could go to areas where the GCB and local partners had identified it was most needed.

***“There's a value to the face-to-face. You can allay people's fears and help them feel more confident about European funding ... truthfully ESF can seem a bit distant and has a reputation for being bureaucratic so we help make it accessible by putting a friendly face to it and being available to answer questions and give detail and reassurance to people.” (regional grant manager)***

***“We reached about 300 people through workshops and seminars and many of those were new to us and to European funding.” (regional grant manager)***

### **2.2.3 A supported application process**

A majority of the regions described their grant application process as a supported one, and across all the Grants Managers we spoke to there was a clear interest in supporting groups to succeed. In one region organisations could only access the application form after speaking to staff first, in others groups were strongly encouraged to either attend presentations and follow-up one-to-one surgeries to learn more and discuss their plans before applying, or to contact the GCB first. Grants Managers felt this contact was really

important and often made a difference to groups' chances of success. In several regions support was given to resubmit where a promising application was made but an organisation had perhaps expressed its plans poorly – for instance, in the North East, applications could be rejected or deferred and if deferred the organisation might be referred for capacity-building support to a local support provider. Where support was offered at a pre-application stage Grants Managers felt this helped ensure that applications were of a better standard, that organisations were being realistic, and that they were prepared for delivering (and, importantly, reporting on) an ESF project.

In most regions funding was allocated in “rounds” though in one (West Midlands) the process was managed as an open programme, without deadlines, on the basis that this helped the GCB staff better space out and manage theirs and their partners' workloads, and because it was felt this would discourage poor, rushed or last-minute applications and help ensure that groups were truly ready to deliver once funding was approved.

***“We offer pre-application support ... normally telephone support. We encourage groups to talk to us before they apply because we want them to succeed. You can see the difference in the applications who've just put an application in and those who've talked to us or attended a workshop first.”*** (regional manager)

***“We did provide guidance notes and we did support some organisations to resubmit their applications. Had I had time I would have supported a lot more groups. ... We did give groups feedback on the areas where they didn't score highly and then I've talked through with many groups how they could have improved their application, how they could have improved the project plan and how they've expressed it.”*** (regional manager)

#### **2.2.4 Robust assessment processes**

GCBs put in place robust processes for assessing applications in an equitable and fair way, developing scoring matrices; recruiting a broad range of knowledgeable assessors/panel members from different organisations to add objectivity; training volunteer assessors/panel members and putting in place peer reviewing arrangements to ensure and check consistency of scoring. In only one region we found some stakeholder feedback that pointed to a lack of consistency between how applications were appraised across different sub-regional panels. This was identified in the region's external evaluation and a recommendation was made to introduce precisely the activities found to be successful in other regions – eg, training assessors/panel members and putting in place review processes to ensure greater consistency.

#### **2.2.5 Start-up support**

In each region Grant Managers described sitting down with groups who had been allocated a grant and going through paperwork either via training/workshops and/or a 1-2-1 contract set-up meeting – something which most regions made mandatory for new grantees. They placed a strong emphasis on early familiarisation with reporting requirements and supporting organisations to understand these. In some instances

Grants Managers reported tailoring forms and requirements to make it easier for groups to meet requirements (though this was only in a small number of cases where there was any flexibility from the SFA to make such changes).

***“We knew from prior experience that groups need to be familiarised with the ESF reporting requirements at an early stage so that they’re clear what they’re committing to from the start. It helps avoid confusion or problems later.” (regional manager)***

## **2.2.6 Grantee satisfaction with application processes and early support**

Our evidence of feedback and satisfaction from grantees is based on feedback surveys produced as part of programme evaluations. In those regions where feedback from grantees was available we found evidence that they were largely positive about the application and assessment process put in place in their region, and about support given at the early stages of the award process. For instance:

- in a survey of grantees in Yorkshire and Humber (n=79), 97% reported feeling satisfied with the grant application process
- in the North East region’s external evaluation 85% of projects providing feedback (n=47) rated the application and assessment process as excellent or good
- a survey of grantees in the North West (n=59) showed that 88% were happy with the overall quality of support offered (rating it as good or excellent). In the same region 94% of those accessing start-up support via induction workshops (n=92), rated these as either useful or very useful.

***“The application was thorough; made you think about areas or stakeholders that you may not already have thought about.” (grantee)***

***“We’ve had funding in the past where we weren’t told about the reporting requirements until too late in the day, so this (induction session) was really useful.” (grantee)***

***“The advantage is a quick application process that allows the delivery to start right away with no delay as sometimes happens with other funders.” (grantee)***

Where we found any dissatisfaction had been expressed by grantees (as identified within a couple of regional evaluations) this was less about application/assessment processes or the quality of early support, but more usually about technical issues (in two regions some technical problems were experienced following the introduction of new/online forms) or about problems with monitoring/reporting requirements once the grant was active (see elsewhere in this report – *section 4.2 - challenges*).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Our findings in relation to satisfaction levels should be taken as indicative only because in each instance evaluators conducting grantee feedback surveys achieved a sample of only c.50% of funded projects and we know little about the make-up of those samples, making it difficult to reliably generalise beyond respondent samples to the programme as a whole.

## 2.3 Projects funded through the programme

### Key findings:

Between 2011-13 almost 1,300 community grants have been awarded to around 1,100 small voluntary and community organisations, many of whom were receiving ESF funding for the first time. Regions were highly effective in ensuring that projects were focused on the most disadvantaged according to the programme's core criteria and priorities. A majority of those funded were not 'traditional' employment or training providers. The range of activities funded was highly diverse and project reports show that the funding enabled a high level of innovation and creativity at project level. Early indications from final programme reporting suggest that perhaps as many as 90% of projects across regions were satisfactorily completed.

### 2.3.1 Number of grants awarded

Across the regions almost 1,300 projects have been funded. The average grant has varied between £5,486 (East Midlands Region) to £11,100 (North West Region). Our best estimate suggests that at least 1,100 individual organisations will have benefited from a grant over the two year period under consideration. (Not all regions were able to report on the number of organisations receiving more than one grant - so we generated an estimate based on proportions reported in those regions where this data was available.)

Region	Grants awarded*
North West	165
North East	111
Yorks & Humber	239
South West	79
Cornwall & Scilly	50
South East	109
East of England	113
West Midlands	315
East Midlands	105
<b>Total:</b>	<b>1,286</b>

\* The variation in number of grants awarded across regions reflects the different amounts of funding available in each region. Some regions had significantly smaller overall budgets than others.

### 2.3.2 Types of organisations funded

Though our dataset on organisations funded is incomplete - with different regions able to access and share different types of data on the organisations they have funded, and not all regional programmes yet complete at the time of our fieldwork - nonetheless we were able to draw out some very general findings about the types of organisations funded across the programme as a whole. We found:

- **A majority were small organisations.** The available data plus anecdotal evidence from Grants Managers strongly supports the case that the majority of those funded were small organisations (with a turnover of under £100k and many with a turnover of under £50k pa), a high proportion of those funded had never had ESF funding before, and for many very small organisations this was the largest grant received to date. Some organisations were ‘branches’ of, or in some way affiliated with larger regional or national bodies (eg, Housing Associations or national charities), but even so they fell within the criteria for small organisations based on their own independent turnover.
- **Organisational status varied.** The status of the funded organisations was varied and included non-registered and registered charities, social enterprises, Community Interest Companies and companies limited by guarantee.
- **A majority were community-based or quite tightly focused on particular communities.** From our mapping analysis based on project listings (available for most but not all regions), we found a high proportion of funded projects were clearly community-based (that is, focused on a relatively small geographic area and focused on a specific community – either geographical or a community of interest). Unfortunately because of the limitations of the data we could not do a more in-depth analysis to consider how far the funded organisations might have been ‘community led’ as well as community-based or community-focused.
- **The range of types of provider was diverse** and went well beyond the “usual suspects” that might traditionally be expected to deliver employment/training-related activities. A majority were frontline rather than second-tier/infrastructure voluntary organisations or social enterprises, and relatively few appear to have been providers of purely employment/training-related services. They could not be neatly categorised but broadly encompassed:
  - **providers chiefly focused on a particular type of service** – eg, arts, culture and heritage groups; environmental groups; radio stations and media organisations; IT and technical organisations; catering or trading organisations; homelessness and housing support providers; volunteering organisations; training providers; small business support providers.
  - **providers chiefly focused on a particular client group** - BME and refugee community groups; children and families services and drop-ins; women’s organisations; crisis and survivor projects (eg, for survivors of violence, harassment, discrimination or other traumatic life experiences); health or disability organisations; projects for ex-offenders; projects for older people; groups for those with alcohol or substance misuse problems.
  - **more generic providers offering a range of types of service to a range of client groups** – eg, church groups; community centres; community projects.

### 2.3.3 Range of activities funded

Just as a variety of types of organisation has been funded, there has also been considerable variety in the types of activity tried and in the different delivery models or approaches adopted.

***“I like to say we’ve funded everything from film-making to forklift truck driving”*** (regional grants manager)

The different approaches to achieving positive outcomes for beneficiary groups reflect a high level of creativity and innovation, and have included:

- formal and informal ‘class-room’ based training (including accredited training, workshops and classes) in basic skills (literacy, numeracy, ICT), English as a second language, employability skills, personal and social skills or sector-specific skills (eg in catering, horticulture, fashion, childcare, health and social care, light industries, etc)
- ‘on the job’ skills training via volunteering, supported work experience and/or mentoring projects
- creative, recreational, environmental, community, or sporting activities often aimed at developing confidence and/or social/interpersonal skills, and often delivered via informal and/or small group settings
- new community-based ‘job clubs’, often with a ‘job-club plus’ approach – ie, offering a wider range of services and types of support than the traditional or mainstream job club
- projects offering very practical support with job-seeking, accessing further education/ training, creating CVs, completing application forms, practising interview skills, etc
- projects focused on one-to-one support, information, advice, guidance, counselling or mentoring
- volunteering schemes focused on confidence-building, work experience, enhancing CVs, supporting work-readiness and the development of skills for employment.

Largely because of this diversity, we cannot neatly categorise the types of activities funded, nor draw any conclusions about any types of activity or approach that might achieve better results than others. Our interviews with Grants Managers did, however, suggest three broad themes or trends that they felt have cut across many of the different types of activities, and that seemed important to them in understanding approaches that seem to work well for very disengaged client groups. These common themes or ‘threads’ were:

- ***Using the funding to try something new*** – Our analysis of project descriptions and discussions with Grants Managers confirmed that a high proportion of funded organisations were using the funding either to try and reach a new client group with an existing service; to offer an existing client group a new service based on an identified need; and/or to offer a service in a new way or in a new setting. For instance, over half the organisations responding to an evaluation feedback

survey conducted in the West Midlands (n=98) reported that they had used the grant to expand their delivery – to try out new activities or new approaches to their work.

- ***Using the funding to build individuals' confidence and self-belief or self-esteem*** – it does seem that many of the funded organisations, if not most, focused on increasing confidence and self-belief as perhaps their most important outcome irrespective of whatever method they employed or approach they were trying. Again this emerged strongly both from project's own descriptions of their priorities, and from our interviews with Grants Managers.

***'I'd say that building confidence and self-esteem was the thing that most of the projects have had in common. It's one of the biggest barriers that cuts across a lot of the target client groups so it isn't surprising that it has underpinned the approach in many projects whatever kinds of activities they've offered.'***  
(regional grants manager)

- ***Ensuring a focus on one-to-one support*** – Grants Managers report that even if not made explicit within original project plans, the funded organisations very commonly offered a strong element of one-to-one support over and above whatever else was offered.

***"Combining one-to-one support with other things has worked particularly well, like small group training complemented with one-to-one support. I think that's been really important and perhaps the most effective."*** (regional grants manager)

#### **2.3.4 Number of projects successfully completed**

Regions report very high project success rates. Very few organisations offered funding are reported as failing to deliver and complete their project broadly in line with their original plans and/or targets. In most regions Grant Managers report between 90 and 95% success rate with very small numbers of projects not completing their project to a degree deemed satisfactory when considering performance against target, local delivery standards and/or compliance with reporting requirements.

When we explored the programme's reportedly high success rate in funding effective projects, Grants Managers broadly attributed it to one or more of the following factors:

- the robustness of the initial application and support process;
- the flexibility of the programme which enabled them to allow organisations to vary targets or adapt their approach as they went along;
- their adoption of a combined funder and enabler role – ie, their capacity to step in and support organisations if they were found to be struggling or underachieving at any point during the life of the project.

## 2.4 Support offered to funded organisations

### Key findings:

The type of support offered to funded organisations has varied across regions. Much of it has focused on supporting groups to meet the programme's monitoring and reporting requirements but in all but one region Grant Co-ordinating Bodies have offered wider capacity-building support for funded organisations. Organisations' take-up of, and feedback on the support offered has been variable – reflecting different perspectives on the relevance and usefulness of the support offered across the regions – though one-to-one tailored support was positively received.

The programme allowed that up to 10% of the sum allocated in grants could be used for capacity building. The support offered was of two types – support for project delivery and broader capacity building support (support for organisational development). In only one region the only support offered was of the first type, that is, support to deliver the funded project – eg, workshops focused on monitoring or one-to-one monitoring and support visits. In the remaining regions some wider capacity -building support was offered either on a one-to-one relatively bespoke/tailored basis or via a generic support programme that organisations could opt into or could be referred into.

### 2.4.1 Support to deliver on the planned project

This support was focused on enabling organisations to improve their reporting and ability to meet the reporting requirements for the grant though some focused on enabling organisations to access equipment, resources or skills that they needed to deliver on their plans. The Grants Managers we interviewed identified reporting as the area where the most support was needed.

***“We wanted to ensure that the money gets out to grassroots organisations with the connections to the people we want to help, to some of the most disadvantaged client groups in the region but we find these organisations may or may not be very good at financial paperwork.”*** (regional grants manager)

***“It can be the difficulty with small projects where the same person is delivering as reporting but they may not have the skills as strongly in reporting as delivering. ... A lot of the support given was around meeting the funding requirements, reporting, the forms, that kind of thing but we also did ask groups what else they needed and some training sessions were delivered.”***  
(regional grants manager)

***“Ultimately the groups got what they really needed to help them deliver.”*** (regional grants manager)

## 2.4.2 Wider capacity-building

Support needs were identified in the regions by some combination of learning from earlier programmes; consultation; formal training needs assessments or health check/diagnostic and planning processes; and/or ad hoc requests for support from funded groups. The way support was offered, and the type of support, varied across regions, but broadly included support in one of the following broad areas:

- **organisational development** (eg, governance, management, finances, quality assurance, volunteer support/supervision, fundraising, monitoring outcomes),
- **service improvement / meeting legal requirements** (eg, health and safety, first aid, fire safety, food safety)
- **development of training capacity** (eg, training in PTLs or similar courses).

Some of the support was offered via a generic package (eg, a programme of fixed training/workshops) but some was more bespoke/tailored (eg, a capacity-building worker offering one-to-one consultancy and support to an organisation). In some regions groups could apply for money (eg, a grant of up to £1,000 to buy equipment or additional support, mentoring or training) sometimes choosing from a menu of options.

## 2.4.3 Uptake and satisfaction with capacity-building support

We lack reliable data on the number of projects/individuals receiving support and the data we do have shows variable levels of take-up and engagement, and mixed levels of satisfaction. However, the North West records that over the past two years 468 individuals benefited from its capacity-building support, including 126 who achieved a qualification (PTLLS), and surveys and feedback forms analysed for both this region and the Yorkshire and Humber region reveal very high levels of satisfaction with capacity-building events, activities and staff support.

***“Very helpful indeed.”*** (grantee)

***“The staff were very supportive and helped immensely in enabling us to deliver the project.”*** (grantee)

In some regions the evidence of satisfaction is less clear cut suggesting a more variable experience, with some Grants Managers reporting insufficient take-up or a mixed reception to some types of support offered. Overall both Grants Managers and organisations reported capacity-building support as important and valuable and any instances of poor take-up or lower satisfaction were attributed simply to practical barriers (eg, lack of capacity to take time out for training or to travel to venues outside of the immediate area), and/or a simple mismatch between groups’ needs and the support offered. Satisfaction levels appear to have been slightly higher with one-to-one support and specialist training (eg, PTLLS) than with generic training or resources (eg, on equal opportunities or diversity), perhaps because these more generic courses were harder to pitch at a level that would suit such a range of providers. Regions were responsive to feedback about their support offer and we found evidence of changes being made in response to groups’ feedback, and in at least one region poor levels of take-up led to the region opening up their support to other small organisations in their area (ie, not just funded projects).

## Section 3: Performance, achievements and outcomes

### 3.1 Project engagement with disadvantaged client groups

#### Key findings:

Regional reporting suggests that, collectively, funded projects exceeded their targets both for the number and profile of beneficiaries reached (targets were set for the proportion of beneficiaries within different priority areas of disadvantage). The available beneficiary data suggests that funded organisations were highly effective at engaging with sections of their communities often described as “hard to reach” including those experiencing high levels of social exclusion and/or multiple disadvantage. The evidence of regional evaluations to date suggests that many beneficiaries were highly satisfied with the support received from projects.

#### 3.1.1 Number and profile of beneficiaries

Across all regions, Co-ordinators report that projects have engaged with more learners / participants than their original target, and sometimes significantly more.<sup>2</sup> In regions where final data on beneficiaries is available, the majority of the funding has reached one or more of the priority groups for the programme and Co-ordinators report meeting or exceeding most of their original profile targets with most estimating that about 90% of the funding in their regions would have gone to one or more of these groups.

Region	Beneficiaries	Disability	Over 50	BME	Female
North West	4,753	37%	21%	38%	62%
North East	>1,635	27%	23%	13%	47%
Yorks & Humber	6,325	31%	22%	34%	53%
South West	>2,300	68%	25%	24%	53%
South East	>4,000	Final profile data not yet available			
East of England	3,123	33%	32%	43%	56%
West Midlands	2,400	15%	27%	39%	54%
East Midlands	1,458	30%	16%	41%	51%
Cornwall & Scilly	>634	Final profile data not yet available			

<sup>2</sup> The figures in beneficiary tables in this section of the report are approximate in some regions as final beneficiary data is not yet available for ‘live’ grants. This means the final total of beneficiaries will be higher than the total suggested, and the profile of beneficiaries may change when final figures are available.

We also found evidence that projects have engaged other individuals experiencing some form of disadvantage – that is, other than the four identified as priority groups. For instance, they have engaged with people on low incomes; those living in highly deprived areas and/or poor or insecure housing; many lacking formal education or qualifications; the long-term unemployed; people with literacy/numeracy problems and those for whom English is a second language; and many individuals with difficult personal histories and/or current life situations that act as a barrier to employment (including homeless people, carers, people with addictions or health problems or mental illness, people with an offending history). For instance:

- in the West Midlands almost a third (30%) of a sample of beneficiaries had no prior qualifications;
- in the North East around 46% of beneficiaries had been out of work for more than 36 months and 17% had no qualifications at all (data from a sample of around half of funded projects);
- in the South West 68% of beneficiaries had some kind of health problem (including disabilities, mental health issues as well as long-term physical health issues).

### **3.1.2 Satisfaction of beneficiaries / learners with project support**

The evaluation evidence that does exist (though sometimes based on small and potentially unrepresentative samples) suggests beneficiaries were largely very satisfied with the quality of support offered by projects. For instance, 98% of respondents to a survey conducted for an evaluation of North West region's programme (n=104) rated activities they were involved in as excellent or good, and across regions reports share positive beneficiary feedback in regards to the content of services and for how services have been delivered.

***“The course was very, very, very, very helpful, because we were given lots of information and the way the tutors teach you gives you the confidence to go out and do what you want to do out there. They help you believe in yourself... it uplifts you, your spirit, mood, belief and the way the group unites and participates it was really, really, really good.”*** (course participant interviewed for regional evaluation report)

## 3.2 Outcomes for individuals

### Key findings:

We found convincing evidence that many funded organisations have contributed to the achievement of both soft outcomes and hard outcomes (progression in employment terms). We were not able to assess or quantify the outcomes achieved, but all indications from the data available at the time of our fieldwork are that many funded projects have achieved a significant impact for some highly disadvantaged individuals and groups whom larger, statutory or other mainstream providers have struggled to effectively engage and support.

### 3.2.1 Soft outcomes

Projects have clearly achieved a range of important soft outcomes for beneficiaries. These have been variously captured in learners' records of different types, and self-reported (using a distance-travelled self-assessment tool or 'progress wheel') as well as reported by staff/trainers in records and case studies. GCBs have collected a wealth of outcomes data - largely in the shape of the individual learner case studies (which were a reporting requirement of the programme). However, there was no requirement, nor capacity, to collect or analyse statistical data in relation to the achievement of soft outcomes over and above all the other reporting data collected. Grants Managers themselves flagged up the difficulties of collecting reliable outcomes data, including concerns about whether or not the paperwork/data collection tools used were helpful/appropriate, and about a heavy reliance on self-assessment by beneficiaries without support/guidance. They also commonly reported feeling that projects had been asked to collect 'the wrong information' – ie, they were not all collecting what was most meaningful for assessing the impact of their work.

***“Really all the SFA have wanted to know is learner starts, enrolments, which is bizarre really. They haven't required us to collect information on other things such as whether or not people complete courses, other outcomes, so that kind of data isn't really there.” (grants manager)***

***“We exceeded our targets. I think we're about 50% ahead on learner numbers ... Although that might look good on paper it doesn't really tell you how many of those interventions have been meaningful. ... The point is that this is what the SFA is looking at but they're not asking for qualifications or jobs because that's not what the funding is about, it's about engaging people, but still I'm sure they could have come up with a basic outcomes star or framework that we could have used to help us monitor outcomes more meaningfully.” (grants manager)***

***“The thing is they just (project staff) want to get on and deliver, outcomes measurement is not a priority.” (grants manager)***

***“I think that we will have achieved around 50% positive outcomes but sometimes this could be a bit distorted because something like job clubs would have a high throughput, relatively high participant numbers, but relatively low success rates when it comes to the kinds of outcomes we’re really interested in because people could come once or twice but then not come back as opposed to the outcomes where someone is taking part in structured, supported learning.” (Regional Grants Manager)***

Bearing in mind these challenges we nonetheless found evidence of a large number of soft outcomes being achieved. The most commonly reported across projects were:

***Increased skills and knowledge***, including:

- Improved basic skills (Literacy, numeracy, ICT)
- Improved personal and social skills (communication, working with others/team work)
- Improved skills for work (presentation, understanding the workplace)
- Increased employment knowledge (of opportunities, employer expectations, work and recruitment-related processes, etc)
- Improved job search knowledge and skills (eg, interview techniques, CV writing, application forms)
- Improved job-related/workplace skills and knowledge (eg, in catering, first-aid, childcare, gardening, health and safety, office-work, etc)

***“I learnt more than I expected to and I enjoyed it. Very helpful to me for the future.” (project beneficiary)***

***Changes in attitudes and motivation***, including:

- Increased self-confidence and self-esteem/self-belief
- Increased confidence in aspects of pursuing personal and career goals
- Improved self-awareness – awareness of own capacity, skills, knowledge, experience
- Improved motivation
- Greater openness/willingness to engage in learning/employment-related activity

***“I changed from my first day onwards and found that my tutor was patient, and I mean patient, and guided me through the course at which at the end I felt for the first time in my life that I finally finished something.” (project beneficiary)***

***“The course has given me more confidence and built up my skill regarding how to be positive if I don’t get interviewed. All I need to do is keep trying till I get where I want to be.” (beneficiary)***

*“In the weeks I have volunteered in nursery school my self-esteem and confidence has greatly improved” (project beneficiary)*

**Increased employability**, for instance:

- An increase in relevant experience, knowledge, skills and/or qualifications
- Positive changes in behaviour (eg, increased punctuality, reliability, management of emotions)
- An increase in references and/or improved CV
- Clearer and/or more informed personal goals and plans.

### **3.2.2 Hard outcomes**

As with data on soft outcomes, we found the data collected on hard outcomes (learner destinations/progression) was patchy and not all yet analysed. Grant Managers also acknowledged some concerns about methodology and attribution – acknowledging that even where positive hard outcomes are reported – that is, measurable progress towards the employment market (defined as having either progressed into education or training; moved into voluntary work; secured employment; or become self-employed) – most projects would struggle to directly attribute these outcomes solely to their interventions. Grant Managers felt that outcomes measurement was largely either new to projects and something they struggled with or simply just not a priority when set against the demands of service delivery. Despite these limitations the emerging findings from end of programme and/or evaluation reports suggest that some projects are contributing to measurable hard outcomes. For instance:

- an evaluation for the West Midlands reports that 30% of beneficiaries have progressed into education, training, volunteering or employment (though this is based on a relatively small sample)
- the South West reports that of 2,300 accessing projects more than half (1,422) went on to further activities such as employment, training and volunteering (590 into volunteering; 362 into paid employment; and 470 into other training)
- project reports in the North West show that around 946 individuals to date (that is, 21% of beneficiaries) have moved into either education (273), employment (360) or regular volunteering (373)
- in the East region 303 learners were supported into employment (108 part-time or 195 full-time), 42 learners moved into self-employment, and 324 found voluntary work. In addition over 200 learners were referred into other ESF and mainstream provision, including both FE and HE
- in the North East project reporting data suggests that 41% of a sample of beneficiaries across projects have achieved a positive progression outcome.

Even with the need for further research and analysis to validate the figures, given what we know of the profile of many of the projects' beneficiaries, their challenges and their distance from the workforce, these findings suggest that at least a proportion of funded projects have achieved some very impressive measurable outcomes for groups often 'written off' or disregarded as 'too hard to help' by mainstream providers.

### 3.3 Outcomes for funded organisations

#### Key findings:

Increasing the capacity of funded organisations to meet the needs of disadvantaged clients was an important programme outcome. Where data was available we found that many organisations could identify one or more of the following positive outcomes related to aspects of increased capacity. These were achieved either as a result of their grant and/or as a result of support received during the life of their grant:

- More funding-ready and in some cases better resourced
- Increased range of services and/or reach
- Improved quality of learning provision
- More organisational capacity.

Particularly in those regions that had undertaken an evaluation exercise, we found some evidence of positive outcomes for organisations. The four main outcomes identified either through reporting, through regional surveys of grantees, or described by interview respondents in our own fieldwork, were:

#### 3.3.1 Increased ability to attract and manage other funding

Some organisations reported feeling better equipped to apply for other funding, with a smaller proportion again reporting having successfully levered in other funding as a result of their grant. For instance:

- 81% of grantees responding to a survey in the Yorkshire and Humber region (n=79) felt more confident in applying for mainstream funding as a result of delivering their community grant
- a quarter of organisations surveyed in an independent evaluation for the West Midlands had leveraged in other funding as a result of their community grant funding.

Both grantees and Grant Managers commonly reported that funded organisations had found the experience of managing an ESF grant helpful as a way of adding to their experience of managing funding and reporting on a funded project, and enhancing their track record and their credibility as a service provider.

***“We thought they (two previously funded projects) would be very negative at the event about the amount of paperwork they had to complete, but in fact they stood up and said to everyone that as much as they found the forms hard to begin with they later found them useful because they said, ‘now we know we have to demonstrate what we’re doing and gather evidence’ and that was quite nice to hear. So, as much as we feel the forms are quite a burden for the groups, they do also give them important skills and help bring them into the world that they need to be in.”***

*(regional manager)*

***“I think the organisations have got some really valuable experience. It might be for some it’s been a difficult and painful journey ... but to be honest it doesn’t get any easier if they wanted to get other mainstream funding and sometimes I think they don’t realise how well they’ve done in coping with it (the paperwork and reporting).” (regional manager)***

***“We’ve had a couple of projects go on to get quite significant amounts of lottery funding following on from their community grant to continue with what we’ve funded so they’ve had clear benefits from their initial grant.” (regional manager)***

***“Our delivery of the ESF grant adds to our track record and experience in delivering Employability Skills contracts as well as working with hard to reach and vulnerable people, eg. ex-offenders. This experience gives us more confidence in applying for a similar contract outside this programme which we are currently doing.” (grantee)***

***“For those who have survived you see them stronger, better at reporting, knowing how to apply for and account for grants. It’s also helped them be more proud of what they do and understand their own value.” (regional manager)***

### **3.3.2 Increased range of services and/or reach**

Many of the funded projects report that receiving their grant enabled them to improve their reach to new client groups (and in particular those experiencing social exclusion and/or economic disadvantage), for the benefit of those clients, their own organisation and the wider community.

***“We have been able to improve our team and gained extra skills and employees, and made contact with new clients who now regularly visit the centre for support. We were able to offer different courses and offer our clients better choice and this will improve our company as a whole.” (grantee)***

***“It helped us with cash flow and allowed us to widen our reach and broaden our experience of delivering outside our usual client group.” (grantee)***

### **3.3.3 Improved quality of learning provision**

Some funded organisations report that the experience of running the project (and the capacity-building support they received alongside their grant) has resulted in increased levels of skills and experience within their staff team, and has improved the quality of their learning provision. For instance, 91% of projects surveyed in North West region

(n=59) reported that the project had enabled them to improve the quality of their learning provision. Some also report that they have been able to accredit their learning following support received during the life of their grant.

***“We’ve had a few organisations who’ve been able to accredit the learning they’ve delivered as a result of working with us ... One group we worked with to get their learning accredited and one group we’ve been doing capacity-building with ... we helped them get Centre Award status so they now can deliver accredited courses. For them as an organisation it’s opened up all sorts of new avenues and helped them access other sources of funding.”***  
(regional manager)

***“...this funding enabled us to retain a member of staff and deliver our first accredited programme.”*** (grantee)

### **3.3.4 Increased organisational capacity**

A commonly reported outcome within project reports and surveys conducted as part of regions’ evaluations was increased organisational capacity, with projects pointing to increases in skills, knowledge, confidence and delivery capacity. Though less commonly reported, there was also some anecdotal evidence that some had also improved their relationships with other providers, with a small number progressing to become venues, subcontractors or partners in mainstream activity as a result of their grant.

***“We were able to put systems in place that will enable us to deliver bigger programmes in the future.”*** (grantee)

***“We have trained and retained two volunteers who assisted us in delivering the programme; we managed to buy equipment for training that we can use to deliver further training/work; our contacts with our beneficiaries remained so if we have the chance to deliver similar programme again, we do not need to start from scratch.”*** (grantee)

***We are now getting more regular referrals from Job Centre Plus (JCP) than we did (previously) ... I think it just takes a long time for an organisation to become part of the mental furniture of people like JCP advisers, so they now think of us when they make referrals when they didn’t before. Without the ESF Community Grant there would not have been the same continuity of delivery that has helped to fix us in their minds.”*** (grantee)

***“...there has been a positive effect on our organisational culture ... we are now providing more continuous professional development for staff.”*** (grantee)

### 3.4 Community benefit

#### **Key findings:**

Several regions were able to clearly evidence a number of wider benefits for local communities as a result of the programme. These include the development of a network of stronger community organisations with increased capacity; more/better services and/or facilities for community benefit as a result of project activities; more support available for disadvantaged sections of the community as more people are volunteering for community purposes; and an improved environment and/or community spaces in local areas that more people can enjoy.

As well as contributing to the creation of stronger organisations who commonly report being able to do more and/or reach more individuals as a result of their grant, a number of other benefits have been observed for local communities.

Many organisations have engaged beneficiaries in activities that have directly benefited communities – for instance, creating or improving local resources and facilities (repairing or rebuilding assets or resources, gardens, open spaces, equipment, buildings) which are then improved for local community use and/or offering new services, activities or leisure opportunities. Regions have not routinely reported on such wider local/community benefits though in the South West region an interesting attempt was made to quantify these. Using project monitoring data the region was able to assess that as many as 25,000 individuals could be classed as indirect programme beneficiaries (ie, people who may have benefited from the services and activities delivered under the programme such as performances undertaken; food provided through cooking or growing projects; charitable retail provision and environmental improvements.

Some claims of community benefit have been harder for projects to verify but an analysis of a sample of organisations' case studies does point to some evidence of outcomes such as increases in social inclusion, and an earlier overview of learning from the programme nationally also hinted at increases in local / community capacity as a result of successful projects.<sup>3</sup>

***“The over-riding effect is that people care and are cared for in our community and will carry on being so.” (grantee)***

***“Successful projects lead to more confident, assertive and effective local capacity.” (Policy Editor, ESF-works)***

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<sup>3</sup> In the course of our desk research a regional Grants Manager shared a presentation put together about the programme's achievements by J Bell, Policy Editor of ESF-Works but we were not able to find out more about the evidence underpinning the conclusions in the presentation (dated 2012).

Other organisations have contributed to an increase in volunteering – particularly as many beneficiaries have themselves gone on to volunteer to help others – what one commentator has called “passing it on” (giving back). This is something we found was observed locally by Regional Managers and independent evaluators, and also emerged as a key finding from the afore-mentioned ESF Works review:

***“Successful progression frequently brings a strong desire to ‘pass it on’.”(Policy Editor, ESF Works)***

We have included below just one example of a project where we can see a kind of snowballing of positive outcomes, a ripple effect that brings benefits to individuals but also to the wider community – including examples of the ‘pass it on’ effect. The description is of work done with a small grant by a local Residents Association in the South West Region.

### **Achieving outcomes for local communities – Bedminster Residents Association**

With a small grant of just over £8,000, Bedminster Residents Association achieved a range of positive outcomes for project beneficiaries, increased its own capacity as beneficiaries became volunteers to “pass it on” to others, and increased the resources and activities available for people in the local area.

The Association started out delivering a learning programme to give homeless people and others in difficult circumstances the skills and confidence to enter the labour market. It delivered a range of workshops for people who were facing multiple challenges both in their lives and in terms of getting back into the labour market but managed to achieve more outcomes than originally planned, including several important benefits for the local community. For instance:

- As a result of two bike repair workshops participants repaired at least 12 bikes which the Association has since been able to lend out to help people without transport to get to job interviews and work, then because the initiative was so successful the local police supplied additional bikes to help the Association benefit even more people in the community.
- Though a computer repair workshop was only attended by four people one of these went on to become a tutor and to run further workshops. Others also benefitted from the repaired computers.
- Music workshops were attended by more than 12 people who went on to plan a full evening at a local nightclub – learning in the process how to create business plans and budgets, how to design posters and event management, thus taking a step towards a longer-term plan to set up their own business.
- A group of volunteers took part in training in gardening and following this created raised vegetable beds at a hostel for the benefit of local residents.
- Two project beneficiaries moved on to apprenticeship courses, three to part-time work, two qualified as sports coaches and at least four others became volunteers in their local area bringing a further benefit for the community.

## Section 4: Learning

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### 4.1 The value and strengths of small community-based providers

#### **Key findings:**

Our analysis of the available data enabled us to identify six clear characteristics of successful projects – factors that have contributed to their success. These include:

1. informality of approach and a trusted reputation and/or relationship with target beneficiaries
2. in-depth knowledge and understanding of the issues and barriers of different beneficiary groups, and of relevant local issues/context
3. the adoption of flexible, tailored and holistic approaches – focused on beneficiaries' individual needs
4. the drive, commitment and relevant experience/knowledge of the people delivering projects
5. an active and real commitment to inclusive practice, valuing people and embracing diversity
6. offering practical and real world learning opportunities, and recognising and celebrating people's achievements.

#### **4.1.1 informality of approach and trusted reputation and/or relationships**

The closeness of the funded small organisations to the target beneficiaries has been identified as a factor in project success. This has been described variously both in terms of physical closeness (geographic location), but also the closeness of their relationship with target communities (eg, being perceived as a known or trusted provider).

***“There’s something important about a person’s confidence about where they’re doing this course – in a place or setting that is unthreatening.”*** (grants manager)

***“The sorts of organisations we’re working with are close to the ground however you want to term that, they have an ‘in’ to communities and to people who won’t go into their local college, those where there’s this nervousness about learning.”*** (grants manager)

The informal approach of projects has also been cited as a success factor because many of those targeted may have a negative perception of ‘official’ service providers, or negative experiences of education or training or the provision of advice about employment. Offering activities in an unthreatening and informal environment and

manner has made the funded projects accessible in a way that some other larger and mainstream providers of employment/training support are not.

***“The projects have understood that many wouldn’t come in through the door if the activity sounded too structured or too much like formal learning or work.” (grants manager)***

***“The way projects have used arts, sports or other interesting or creative ways to engage people. They have consciously tried to think of imaginative ways to get people through the doors so they can build a relationship with them and then after that they can help them look at what they want to do with their life. It’s been about offering an unthreatening way of getting people through the doors.” (grants manager)***

***“It has mattered that the projects have been engaging and enjoyable – like we had a group doing tennis and we thought ‘tennis??’ but they arranged a tournament, they learnt about how to plan the event, how to promote it, so it wasn’t really about tennis it was about the skills in putting the event together. A lot of the participants have a bit of a fear of statutory providers. They’d rather go down a local community centre than the job centre because they’re treated differently. They get their individual needs looked at better.” (grants manager)***

#### **4.1.2 in-depth knowledge and understanding of issues, barriers and locality**

Projects were widely praised for demonstrating a strong understanding of the real barriers for their target beneficiaries, and for creating a safe environment where people’s issues and challenges could be shared and then addressed. They were also recognised as having important local knowledge and connections which aided good understanding and signposting and referring people on as appropriate for additional support or to make the most of local opportunities.

***“They know what’s happening in their community. There was a group in (this area) and they knew a (superstore) was going to open in the future and so they concentrated on interview skills and CV writing and that kind of thing and worked really well with the store as well and in the end I think they got interviews for about 70 people and mainly people who’d never got to the interview stage previously and so the store were delighted as well because they had people coming in to choose from who were interviewing very well.” (grants manager)***

#### **4.1.3 flexible, tailored and holistic approaches focused on individuals' needs.**

One of the most frequently mentioned factors in the success of the funded projects was their ability to take a flexible approach that enabled them to really focus on individuals' particular needs. Many adopted a holistic approach and offered one-to-one support as a part of their work. Successful projects were commonly described as client-led not target-led and working holistically (and in this contrasted positively with statutory or larger providers).

***“What works is that the support is given on a one-to-one basis, tailored to your own needs rather than being more generic, that seems to have more impact.”*** (grants manager)

***“The importance of personalised attention, a holistic approach, intensive support and encouragement that brings about changes in attitude and self-belief cannot be underestimated.”*** (Conclusion of independent regional evaluation)

***“Being able to spend significant time with clients and tailor support to their needs was a key factor in achieving improved confidence and self-esteem.”*** (Conclusion of independent regional evaluation)

***“Ultimately the value of the projects has lain in what difference they've made to participants who in so many cases have got no confidence whatsoever. ... They are reaching and engaging with people that statutory providers just don't reach. It's been about innovative approaches that show the organisations really understand what people's barriers are to finding work. They know you don't just sit someone down in front of a computer and say 'find yourself a job'. Things are more tailored to individual needs than having a kind of blanket approach.”*** (Grants Manager)

One of the advantages of projects' individualised and holistic approach was identified by several Grants Managers we spoke to who felt strongly that this was enabling projects to “unpick” and get to the heart of the real barriers that were stopping progression towards employment for those facing complex or multi-layered disadvantage. In this again small community projects were favourably compared to larger/mainstream providers who were judged as rarely having the time or capacity to get to the heart of people's problems so as to really help address them and enable people to move on.

***“Also because of the fact that many might have chaotic lives so they bring with them other issues but then groups would look to deal with those as well. I think there's an awful lot of goodwill out there in the groups and once they've engaged with somebody they see that through.”*** (Grants Manager)

***“The programme was a steep learning curve for many of our beneficiaries who worked hard but needed additional support with their personal problems or social problems as well as requiring language assistance.” (grantee)***

***“For example one of our projects works out of a school and works with parents identified by the school as not engaging and it’s all done to give them the confidence to read at home with their children but it throws out so many other issues - like people with undiagnosed dyslexia, or parents not reading with their children because they can’t actually read themselves, and this is coming out even though the project isn’t really intense or anything, it’s only a five-day course that’s very informal and friendly, but it helps identify issues that wouldn’t have come out in any other way. As it comes out in the course then they’re able to signpost parents for help somewhere else and so they’ve broken a cycle because they’ve enabled the parents ... to tell someone. They’ve started them on a journey.” (grants manager)***

***“When you go somewhere small, the staff don’t mind spending a hour with you or more if that’s what you need. You get the personal touch, you’re seen as an individual. Also once they feel comfortable with the organisation the other thing that you find is that they will share other things that might be the real barriers, so they’re not going to get a job or go into education if they’ve got this bundle of other issues and there are a number of our providers who’ve reported that they’ve been picking up quite an increase in the number of people where they’re seeing mental health issues that have come out so that some want to build in future projects to have some support around managing stress and that kind of thing.” (grants manager)***

#### **4.1.4 the people - leadership, drive, commitment and experience**

In three of the regions engaged in our research reference was made to the importance of leadership and the high quality, skills, knowledge and commitment of project leaders and delivery staff. Grants Managers identified how a charismatic leader or lead worker has been crucial for many projects’ success, and how valuable it has also been to have projects delivered by staff and/or volunteers who share the background and sometimes the experiences of the service users.

***“Inspiring leadership is something I think has been important. There are some very charismatic people running these projects who are able to enthuse and pass on that sense of confidence to people that they can make it. I don’t know how you define that but you can tell it when you see it.” (Grants Manager)***

***“It’s down to him and he’s an extraordinary individual. It is individuals. It’s because of that special individual that brings something that you can’t manufacture. It has to do with them. Our evaluator is drawing this out in his evaluation. I think it’s the crucial thing is the individual personalities. So much is about the relationships that are built. This guy is so credible and he really knows his stuff.” (Grants Manager)***

#### **4.1.5 inclusive practice, valuing people and embracing diversity**

Grants Managers and project leads were able to identify numerous examples of ways in which organisations brought to life a very real commitment to diversity and inclusive practice in their work. This was seen as an important contributory factor to project success in engaging at a genuine and deep level with highly disadvantaged client groups who may in other settings have routinely experienced feelings of exclusion, discrimination or even harassment because of their difference and/or their disadvantage in employment, training or educational settings. Just a few examples found within project reporting include:

- Adapting materials – the type of literature/medium and/or the language used – to increase accessibility
- Using small group work to better engage individuals struggling in large group or classroom settings
- Recruiting volunteers affected by the same issues as clients (eg, mental health, offending, substance misuse) – including encouraging former clients to volunteer - to increase empathy with clients and offer positive role models
- Ensuring venue accessibility – including by providing transport help for those with mobility problems and ensuring access ramps in place for wheelchair users or those who might struggle with step access
- Recruiting individual supporters or mentors for participants struggling to engage (eg, individuals with a physical disability, health problem or literacy problem needing extra support)
- Additional contact, support and encouragement between sessions to build confidence and encourage those with low confidence who might otherwise drop out of ongoing courses/programmes
- Employing volunteers to support less able learners on a one-to-one basis and/or promoting peer support – encouraging more able learners to instruct the less able learners in activities they had previously learnt and practiced.
- Offering offsite support – eg, home visits/assessments for those lacking in confidence to attend centres
- Offering support to use assistive technologies.

Our interviews with Grants Managers revealed that they felt strongly that projects have succeeded in part because they have genuinely valued and seen the best in people and supported them to value themselves, their skills and achievements.

***“It’s about ... our projects have come from a place where they’ve recognised that everybody has something to offer and sometimes its about taking time to tease out that person’s skill - because sometimes people feel hopeless and like they don’t have anything to offer, but they do if someone just takes the time to help them find it, and that’s what helps with building the confidence.” (Grants Manager)***

#### **4.1.6 offering practical learning opportunities, and celebrating achievements**

Grants Managers assessed that many successful projects did well because their emphasis was on providing experience that was highly practical, useful, and based in the ‘real world’ as opposed to formal or ‘academic’ learning opportunities. This included many projects’ emphasis on practising skills in safe environments; projects offering volunteering and supported work tasters and placements and work-based learning opportunities; and those offering practical support for self-employment.

***“Support for self-employment has worked well for some. For a lot of the people we’re targeting finding employment could be really challenging, if they lack qualifications, have a history of offending, or a lack of experience, and for these self-employment can be a really important option and may be more realistic for them, the opportunities for flexible working, you don’t need to present your employment history to an employer.” (grants manager)***

***“I couldn’t generalise but I think the volunteering projects, where people have got a real feel for the world of work, those have been very practical if you like, you learn more by doing I often think, and so they have achieved good results.” (grants manager)***

Projects’ emphasis on encouragement and recognition of individuals’ achievements was also deemed an important success factor and the offer of qualifications or certificates was seen as particularly valuable for those with no qualifications who might be receiving acknowledgement of their achievements and learning for the first time in their lives.

***“Some of the stories of how people feel when they get that first certificate they’ve ever had are just heart-warming. It can make a genuinely life-changing difference to people who may previously have felt worthless and not able to achieve.” (Grants Manager)***

## 4.2 Case examples

The short case examples that follow are intended to give a flavour of the diversity of the funded projects but more specifically to illustrate the success factors and learning points drawn out above. Our original intention was to develop a small number of short exemplars through qualitative interviewing and desk research. However, desk research became our primary method because of concerns expressed in regions about the potential of overloading funded groups with requests for information at a time when many were focused on end of grant reporting requirements. Almost all Grants Managers suggested we build on existing case studies developed locally (and/or for the ESF Works good practice website – [www.esf-works.com](http://www.esf-works.com)) rather than asking funded groups to engage in further research activities. This informed both our choice of case studies and how they were developed.

### Overview of case examples

1. **Guildford Job Pub** – making job club activities more accessible through offering them in an informal setting, taking a more holistic approach to meeting people’s support needs.

*South East Region*

2. **Hereford Care Farm** – challenging young offenders’ ideas and perceptions about their rural environment but more importantly about themselves and what they can achieve.

*West Midlands Region*

3. **Breaking Barriers (IT) Project** – offering informal learning in a relaxed community environment, building IT skills, self-confidence and motivation to engage with further learning.

*Yorkshire & Humber Region*

4. **Signing Deaf Club** – led by deaf staff for deaf clients, an inclusive job club service achieving high levels of success for a group often excluded from learning and employment opportunities.

*East Midlands Region*

5. **Gap Unit “Step Up!” Project** – empowering women from BME and refugee communities through a supported, participatory learning programme.

*North West Region*

## Achieving success with an informal and holistic service - Guildford Job Pub

**The service:** This project run by Guildford Job Club was launched in 2012 in partnership with Stoke Pub and Pizzeria. The Job Club wanted to see if offering a service a few days a week in a well-used community venue would increase take-up among groups not accessing support in its more formal office setting. During Job Pub sessions staff and volunteers offer one-to-one support and coaching, access to laptops for job search, and regular sessions covering interview practice, CVs, presentation skills, and other practical topics and opportunities to meet others and network.

**Outcomes:** The project has achieved a good take-up and a range of positive outcomes for beneficiaries but staff feel that at the heart of its success is increasing people's sense of self-worth. They describe how the project is "unlocking potential" among participants who they find commonly overlook what potential they have within them. A lot of the focus of their work is about encouraging clients to recognise what they have to offer and building people's sense of self-worth and confidence as well as giving them the skills and knowledge they need to make a difference to their employed status.

### Success factors:

- **The informal and holistic approach** – the project takes time for people, seeing them as individuals and taking time to deal with any wider issues and barriers that may be hindering their path to employment/training.
- **The accessible venue** – the Pub was already an active community facility, well-located for passing trade and offers a welcoming space
- **Staff** - bring good local knowledge, connections and skills across wider areas than just jobsearch which enables a holistic approach and helpful signposting
- **Partnerships** – other partners provide important support including access to laptops and training, enabling the Job Pub to offer a wider range of services
- **Volunteers** – from the start volunteers worked alongside paid staff and over time members have joined as volunteers to help others in similar situations to their own. This adds important knowledge but also an extra level of empathy and credibility within the team and volunteers can be positive role models for clients.

**Challenges and learning:** Many participants need the one-to-one opportunity to unburden and discuss barriers and issues before they can think about job searches. Many of those attending are experiencing more complex problems and multiple disadvantage than originally anticipated so the team is often helping with people additional challenges such as language, literacy and numeracy, mental health issues, poor housing, lone parenting or poor health. This has led to a rethink of the way that the project supports participants and some more intensive one-to-one support on wider issues, as well as more need for signposting and working closely with other agencies.

*"There is an ability of the organisations to engage more closely. They're not seen as the establishment or as official. Guildford Job Pub is a great example of this. People would go to the Job Pub rather than an official provider because they would have 45 minutes to give them and that's it, but you could go to the Job Pub and be there all morning and relationships are built up over time and those relationships matter and you know someone would really help you." (Regional Grants Manager)*

## **A care farm approach – Herefordshire SHIFT project**

**The service:** Social Healing through Integrated Farm Therapy (SHIFT) provides work experience on a family-run, traditional farm. They provide opportunities for accredited and non-accredited learning. For this project they worked closely with the youth offending service and local police to recruit young offenders to work on the farm for one day a week over 48 weeks. Attendance on the project involved experiencing the working day of a farmer. Tasks were both 'real' and seasonal.

**Outcomes:** The project has helped participants make real changes in their lives. They have seen young people experience personal growth, with marked changes in attitudes, in their openness and levels of self-motivation. They have seen growth in self-esteem as young people are challenged and encouraged to overcome their reservations, address any negative attitudes or behaviours, build their confidence in practical tasks and in working with others, find things they are good at and get a sense of achievement. Some have developed a real work ethic that was lacking before and an interest in progressing to further study or employment.

### **Success factors:**

- **Partnership** and close work with Youth Offending Service workers
- **Adopting a youth work approach** – staff focus on enabling, encouraging, supporting, and believing in the potential of the young people
- **One-to-one support opportunities** – the team allow young people to open up, build up trust and confidence and take part at their own pace
- **Staff knowledge and understanding** - they have a good understanding of the difficulties and barriers experienced by some young people in getting involved and can support them to overcome these.

**Case study:** A joined the project within its first month of operation. She arrived as a shy, withdrawn and nervous individual who didn't want to involve herself in any aspect of the farm. Initially she refused to participate in activities and chose to spend lunchtimes in her Youth Offenders Service (YOS) worker's car, rather than sit with the others in the restroom. Slowly however the project saw a significant change in A: she began to join in with conversations, she started to stand on the animal side of the gate rather than the road side, and she chose to eat her lunch in the restroom with the others. Gradually through staff encouragement and using different engagement techniques A became actively involved in the farm duties during her days on the farm. She moved from being someone who refused to go near the animals or the machinery, to someone by the project able to catch sheep, drench them, trim their nails, drive a tractor, etc. YOS team colleagues report how through attendance on the SHIFT project A began to open up more and discuss aspects of her home life that were affecting her. She left the project with in-house qualifications and an accredited OCN award in Practical Teamwork, Communication and Employability Skills. As well as other learning and positive outcomes, perhaps most significantly taking part in the project taught A to believe in herself and learn to trust people, as well as giving her a willingness to plan for a future away from crime and relying on the system.

*“This was the most rewarding aspect of the project as we saw young people arrive as withdrawn, unsociable individuals leaving as team players who believed in themselves. The project enabled beneficiaries to develop confidence and some have gone on to further education and/or training.” (Project Co-ordinator)*

## Breaking down isolation, building up confidence - the Breaking Barriers Project

**The service:** The Breaking Barriers project was run by SilenceBreaker Media in partnership with a local Community Centre in Edlington, Doncaster. Recognising that internet access has become increasingly important for those seeking employment, the project was set up to tackle the fact that many in the local community had poor access to the internet and/or lacked IT literacy and were therefore missing opportunities. It engaged 17 unemployed learners on a course learning how to rebuild computers. It aimed to give participants the chance to develop IT and social media skills and increase their employability. During the course participants gained hands-on knowledge and skills in how to rebuild and update computer hardware, how to install free software, how to use the internet and how to search for jobs online.

**Outcomes:** By the end of the course participants reported the following outcomes.

- Improved IT skills – software and hardware, set up email and used for first time, search skills
- Increased confidence and self-esteem – from encouragement of tutors and peers, from learning new things and from realising what they were capable of
- Learning how to market themselves better - and with increased awareness of their personal strengths and assets usable in the marketplace (including better CVs and job-seeking skills, including online job searching)
- Improved social skills and ability to relate to and work with others – from group tasks during the training, from working together and supporting one another within a small group setting
- 12 out of the 17 participants continued onto further training, with several also considering and/or actually starting volunteering positions with the organisation.

**Success factors:**

- **Venue** - An accessible community venue
- **Support** - Practical tasks and sufficient learner support to enable people to learn at different paces
- **Encouragement and confidence-building** - The focus on confidence-building and working together as well as practical skills was important
- **Staff** - the quality and positive approach of tutors was appreciated and remarked on in participant feedback. They appreciated that they were working with some individuals who did not find formal learning easy and worked hard to make the training accessible and enjoyable for all.

**Challenges/learning:** It was at first hard to recruit to the course so some joined late which meant not all achieved the intended outcomes, though all achieved some. The team assessed because they were based in a very deprived area that future work would need more run-in time, time to build awareness, trust and the profile of the project.

*“I actually understand what and how my computer works. I know plenty of useful things now to better my future. I have a CV now and am more informed and up to date. Got an email address and can print off data when needed. I've got awareness and ability to search for what future prospects I can improve upon to get to be a working mum and not a 'DOLEY'. I really needed this.” (participant)*

## **Challenging exclusion and inequalities - Signing Network Job Club for the Deaf**

**The service:** Signing Network (a Leicester-based Community Interest Company) created a weekly Job Club for 24 weeks to offer 15 deaf and hard-of-hearing jobseekers help with employability skills and finding employment. The unemployment rate among deaf jobseekers is significantly higher than the national average and for many communication barriers are compounded by employer perceptions of health and safety risks. Deaf people who have been out of work for a long time may lack confidence in their abilities and value as a prospective employee. The first barrier for a deaf person is usually communication so the project offered employment skills and support in a British Sign Language environment, creating a supportive space where the communication issue is resolved and people feel comfortable, understood and valued. A series of mini-workshops offered advice on topics including CVs and cover letter writing, presentation skills, interview techniques, networking skills and volunteering opportunities, but a strong element of the service was one-to-one support from a specialist employment advisor.

**Outcomes:** The Job Club gave participants the ability to compete for jobs on a more equal footing. Participants reported increases in confidence and positive thinking, and more optimism about future employment prospects. Over and above learning new skills and building confidence, the project was very successful in achieving hard outcomes. A total of 21 participants registered, 13 of whom completed the full programme. 46% of those completing the programme found employment or self-employment; 15% went into voluntary work; and 84% said they had improved their job search

### **Success factors:**

- **Creating an enabling environment** - in the Signing Network environment participants were able to feel comfortable in their own language, which is British Sign Language. This enabled them to focus on real employability issues rather than feel isolated and disenfranchised as they would within a mainstream environment.
- **The staff** - the service was unique in being delivered by an employment support specialist who is himself deaf. His direct knowledge and experience of the barriers deaf people face in finding work, his understanding and empathy were much appreciated by clients and contributed to their positive engagement.
- **One-to-one support** - one-to-one sessions enabled the advisor to work with the individual to identify their skills and develop tactics to overcome their own particular difficulties, making the service much more personalised and tailored to their needs.
- **Goal setting and planning** - participants agreed their own Individual Learning Plan tailored to develop their skills and address any needs and this helped people set and achieve their goals and track their own progress.

**Challenges and learning:** The project required some work to challenge and change employer perceptions and concerns associated with deaf employees so the employment adviser worked with employers to help them understand both the support they and their prospective deaf employee are entitled to and the value and benefits that deaf employees can bring to an organisation.

*"It was really difficult for me before I met Tony at the project. I had faced some discrimination ... but I should have the same chance to work as everybody else. Tony helped reinforce that and helped me feel that everyone really is equal. I had interview support to build my confidence, an interpreter to come with me to interview ... I got a temporary job which I was really pleased about. I've really, really enjoyed the job club and it's been a fantastic help to me. If it hadn't been there I would have been completely stuck." (participant)*

## Empowering women through supported learning – the Step Up! project

**The service:** The GAP Unit in Manchester offers a range of services for marginalised women to empower them to gain skills and confidence to gain control of their own lives and effect change. The “Step Up!” was designed as a participatory training programme aimed at equipping BME and refugee women with the skills needed to overcome some of the barriers they face in accessing employment and higher/further education. As well as training it included information and advice, one-to-one support and mentoring.

**Outcomes:** The project achieved a range of positive outcomes, including:

- Improved social skills
- Increased skills relevant for the work environment
- Increased confidence and self-esteem
- Clearer personal goals, sense of direction and increased motivation

**Success factors:**

- **The participatory nature of the training** - tailored to the needs/interests of the participants
- **The focus on empowerment**
- **Opportunities for networking and peer support**
- **The creation of a safe women-only space** for women to share their experiences and support each other’s learning
- **Offering crèche and support with transport** to make the course more accessible.

**Case study:** Charity is from Uganda and came to the UK in 2007. She applied to do the Step Up! Course because she wanted to build her confidence, learn how to write a CV and improve her job searching skills. She took part in the first Step Up! training and as a result of her involvement in the course she has now started a BA (Hons) Youth and Community Work degree at Manchester Metropolitan University. She commented:

*“Step Up! ... empowered me get out of my shell and get back my confidence ... helped me improve my CV and I was also able to identify an education opportunity that is close to my heart. The course was very good and I got more than I had expected ... As part of the course I had a chance to visit Manchester Metropolitan University to explore courses which we could pursue. I couldn’t have done this on my own, because when you are new you don’t know, you look at buildings and they scare you. Step Up! invited a University lecturer who gave us a talk that was like a key opener because from what she talked, I was really convinced that I could apply. I had such a good feeling that this was where I belonged. ... (Someone) discouraged me and said it was really difficult and a hard process but Step Up! gave me the right information confidence and support to apply. I applied for Youth and Community Work which is an academic course at a degree level. I was offered a place and I have now started a three year degree course. That moment when I received a phone call from the University that I have been offered a place was the happiest moment of my life, I will cherish it for a long time. It is such sweet and empowering feeling to be part of the educated community. My life at the University is a dream come true. Lecturers and fellow students are so helpful, I already feel part of the community. In my language ‘Akalango’ is an announcement or hot –hot gossip. So I always tell people about Step Up! “Thank you Step Up! The world is now my oyster.”*

## 4.3 Challenges and enablers

### Key findings:

Grants Managers and project leads identified three main challenges faced by small organisations in delivering their projects and achieving their targets. These were:

- coping with reporting requirements;
- being negatively affected by staff turnover; and
- over-estimating the level of demand and the number of potential beneficiaries which in turn engendered anxiety about under-performance.

Factors identified as helping enable effective delivery of the programme and the success of the funded projects include:

- allowing projects to focus on realistic soft outcomes;
- knowledge and contacts of regional programme delivery partners;
- supportive approach of, and positive relationships with, the delivery partners.

### 4.3.1 Challenges

***Coping with reporting requirements.*** The most commonly mentioned challenge experienced by funded projects was dealing with the amount and complexity of the reporting requirements. A majority of respondents within regional evaluations found it burdensome, with some feeling it had a negative impact not only on the morale of staff and the amount of time left for delivery after reporting requirements had been met, but also a negative effect on their service to clients. Some organisations felt strongly that the paperwork was too intrusive for their client group and some of the learner record requirements were described as inappropriate for anyone with literacy problems or not comfortable with sharing personal details – eg, survivors, LGBT clients, those with a history of offending or substance misuse or other sensitive issue. Grant Managers’ almost unanimously felt the paperwork and requirements were heavy for the size and type of grant.

***“The other area was how organisations that are very confidential could actually complete the forms. For instance there was an LGBT group who didn’t feel comfortable having to take people’s details and fill in forms with them and then also a group working with women survivors and offenders, ex-offenders. We had to find ways that were acceptable to the SFA to register and record the data that worked for groups like this.”*** (Grants Manager)

***“We had one group, a gypsy and traveller group, who struggled with the information we asked for on the Individual Learner Records and that was a massive barrier for them. They handed the money back in the end because it was too bureaucratic for them.”*** (Grants Manager)

***“In many cases clients were either reluctant to provide such detailed information particularly to a non-statutory organisation, or because English was not their first language ... organisations also commented that the volume of data that needed to be collected and the time and effort needed to gather it was high, and often disproportionate to the amount of funding received.”***

*(Independent evaluation finding, regional evaluation report)*

***“I do think some of the information we have to collect and some of the processes we have to follow are just pointless ... the evidence we’re gathering I think we’ve had to take it further than it needs to be.”*** *(Grants Manager)*

***Coping with staff turnover.*** Because organisations were small and the projects were often managed and/or even delivered by one named individual, staff turnover could have a disproportionately negative effect on project delivery and/or reporting. In each region Grants Managers mentioned staff changes as a factor affecting project performance and/or project reporting, with two Managers feeling this issue had been more acute in this round of funding than in earlier programmes – perhaps a reflection of higher rates of turnover or churn in the sector’s staffing as so many voluntary and community organisations have had to make changes and/or reduce staffing levels in response to challenging financial times.

***“There were a number of organisations where their staff had left or the staff had been cut down and the responsible member of staff for this programme had left and there hadn’t been a proper handover so it really left the organisation struggling to report back and I’d never had that happen in any other programme as much as this one so there was a need for extra support for some of those projects. ... It was a real learning that there shouldn’t be just one person in the organisation that is familiar with the programme.”*** *(Grants Manager)*

***“What we’ve found has made things harder in this last round is a lot of staff changes so a lot of things that people do maybe they don’t record how they’ve done it and then they walk out of the door and then all that information goes with them.”*** *(Grants Manager)*

***“The training and visit at the beginning are helpful – until there’s a staff change and then they can get themselves in a terrible mess with the paperwork.”*** *(Grants Manager)*

**Failing to reach beneficiaries in anticipated numbers.** This was not so common a challenge as the two mentioned above, but was mentioned in several regions. It was broadly attributed to one of two factors:

- being over optimistic/unrealistic; and/or
- not having sufficient consulted beneficiaries or involved them in planning.

***“a very small proportion did struggle with numbers and that was partly because they’d set their numbers far too high, the numbers they said they could bring in, so we did actually say to some of them that we felt they were setting unrealistic numbers and they should bring them down because I think that people think the higher the numbers they put in the more likely they are to get the funding. We’ll deliver the next programme and we will be much stronger on advising people to keep their numbers realistic given the size of the grant and what they’re offering.”*** (Grants Manager)

***“I think they struggled mostly because they were worrying so much about what would happen if they didn’t succeed. You have to try and get people to calm down and tell them not to worry so much. There’s a fair bit of reassurance involved.”*** (Grants Manager)

***“I quite often talk to groups and they’ll say they will target say 15 people but then they don’t reach 15, they can get quite anxious that they’ll get less money so I have to reassure them it isn’t unit priced by participant or by outcomes. I tell them if you’re targeting the right people you’re likely to have people who will drop out, those who are hard to reach, have chaotic lives.”*** (Grants Manager)

***“Actually we look for evidence of consultation. When you talk about lessons learnt. We’ve learnt from funding in the past where you fund a group to do x y and z but what they haven’t actually done is ask the community if they’d like x y and z and it fails so if we don’t see any evidence of consultation or need it would really really be a low priority.”*** (Grants Manager)

***“... we found some projects targets that were unrealistic. It was only £12,000 so to reach 100 people is aiming high - the expectations were a bit too high. We had a few of those. With the monitoring then they realise its not going to happen and then we’d review the numbers. It wasn’t failure, there’s no penalty, so it was just being over-ambitious.”*** (Grants Manager)

### 4.3.2 Enablers

Factors commonly held by local stakeholders to be enablers of success in managing the programme and enabling projects to deliver effectively were:

**The flexibility offered by a focus on soft outcomes:** this was widely acknowledged as helpful and an enabler of creativity and flexibility, participant engagement and the achievement of positive outcomes.

*“The grant has provided a very useful source of income generation in terms of supporting people with employability. I think the way it is offered focuses the mind at the same time enables creativity and some innovation”. (Grantee)*

*“Funding is focused more on building the capacity of learners rather than forcing them to go back to employment even if they are not yet ready to do so. This in my view is a lot more effective as learners are more motivated to learn and they are not pressurised to progress to the next stage.” (Grantee)*

*“One of the strengths of the programme was the flexibility to focus on softer outcomes rather than hard outputs” (independent evaluator, regional evaluation report)*

**Knowledge of regional and local delivery partners:** The extensive knowledge (and connections) of the Grant Co-ordinating Bodies and their partners were recognised within regional evaluations as important factors in the successful management of the programme and strong local partnerships were identified as an area of added value.

*“This is about the 5th programme we’ve delivered so we’ve obviously picked up how to deliver and manage a programme like this and how you get out to the right organisations and partly that’s because it’s the kinds of organisations we work with anyway, they know us and trust us but also the relationship we’ve got with (partner delivery organisation) has worked very well as well and you need all that in place. (Grants Manager)*

*“We’ve relied on goodwill and the support of other organisations - like our sub-regional assessors are all volunteers from the public or voluntary sector. It’s been critical to our success Our partnerships and goodwill add a lot of value and without this we wouldn’t have been able to deliver.” (Grants Manager)*

**Supportive approach of delivery agencies:** Positive and supportive relationships with grantees were seen as key to the programme’s success and projects’ ability to deliver.

*“The personal touch, flexible grant management – there’s a bit more handholding on this than there is with other programmes.” (Grants Manager)*

## 4.4 Reflections on learning for future community grants programmes

### Key findings

In our interviews with grants managers we asked them to reflect on what they had learnt that might be most relevant for future community grant funding programmes. Their learning focused chiefly on four areas:

- Support for grantees;
- Data collection processes and use of data;
- Ways to improve the learner experience; and
- Sharing learning and raising awareness of the value of small community grants.

In our interviews with Grants Managers we asked them to reflect on their learning, and to consider what they might do differently in the future based on their learning. All those we spoke to felt they had achieved much of what they had set out to do, and felt they were funding valuable work and reaching those most in need of support, but four common themes or ideas for improvement did emerge as learning points common across a majority of regions – though these ideas were offered with the strong proviso that they and other changes would be dependent on future resourcing and capacity. The four areas for change were: to offer more support and more ongoing support; to improve data collection and make better use of data; to offer more support to improve the learner experience; and to explore ways of doing more to share learning and raise awareness of the value of grassroots grants programmes.

### 4.4.1 improving support and the level and timing of support

Commonly in interviews and in evaluation findings Grants Managers suggested they needed more time for support so that they could increase levels of project contact and visits. They felt a higher level of contact, and contact on a more ongoing basis (enabling more proactive rather than reactive/trouble-shooting support) would be beneficial to support improved project performance and better outcomes.

***“We have to offer to people who get the funding the appropriate support at the right time. We tell people at the very beginning about the reporting and financial requirements and the evidencing of spending, etc. but at that stage they aren’t receptive to the message, they’re busy planning the project and then delivering so then 6-9 months down the line sometimes the people you gave the initial message to have moved on so then it’s a bit of a shock. I’d like to try and address this.” (Grants Manager)***

### 4.4.2 simplifying and streamlining reporting and improving the use of data

Though much work had taken place across regions to make reporting requirements and the forms and processes used as simple as possible, almost every Grants Manager felt

further improvements could be made – particularly if requirements of ESF and the SFA could be streamlined or more flexibility about requirements could be introduced at that level. There was also some keenness to be clearer about where data goes, how it is used, and how it could be used better. Grants Managers recognised that they had overseen the collection of a wealth of data that, if used properly (appropriately stored, collated and analysed) might enable a stronger story to be told about the programme, what has been achieved and what has been learnt. There was a particular interest in any support that could be offered to enable better capture of meaningful outcomes data.

#### **4.4.3 improving the learner experience**

Several regions raised an interest in how they might offer organisations support to improve the learner experience – for instance could they offer support to improve the quality of training, or support to enable better networking and partnerships between organisations to improve learner progression routes between community grants-funded projects and/or on from these projects to mainstream provision.

***“I’d like to have time to do more inspections of training delivery to help enhance the quality of provision.” (Grants Manager)***

***“I think it would be good to bring mainstream providers and community grants organisations closer together to improve referrals and progression routes for community grants learners and our future plans include an event to raise the profile of community grants work, promote networking and hopefully contribute to this more joined-up working.” (Grants Manager)***

#### **4.4.4 sharing learning and raising awareness of the value of community grants**

Grants Managers raised some of the challenges faced in capturing what has been achieved and getting the message out to others of the value of funding small organisations via a small community grants scheme. Some felt that in part because of poor monitoring/evaluation practice and in part because some important outcomes might realistically occur after the life of a short-term project overall we might be in danger of underestimating the true value and overall impact of the programme. We found an interest in looking in future at whether or not there are ways to capture better evidence or make better use of the existing evidence, and share findings more widely. As one interviewee put it:

***“We’re just really pleased someone wants to hear the story of the good work that’s been done. We’ve been trying for some time to get the message out there but it’s seemed like no-one’s interested. Some of the projects we’ve supported here have been just amazing and overall it’s been one of the best programmes we’ve run for value for money and achievements.” (grants manager)***

## Section 5: Conclusions

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We end this report by pulling together some of the conclusions we were able to draw across five broad areas of our findings:

- The need for, and value of, small grants provision for community-based organisations
- The factors that contribute to community-based organisations' success in reaching 'hard to reach' groups and achieving positive outcomes
- The important role a funder can play in supporting small organisations to succeed
- The impact on efficiency and impact of having a monitoring and reporting system that is not as well aligned to programme goals, scope and scale as it could be
- The potential for further research or evaluation to address questions of interest which were outside the scope of our research.

### Conclusion 1

There is a clear need for, and value in, offering small community grants as a way of enabling community-based organisations to engage with groups often defined as 'hard to reach'.

Our research has demonstrated that there is both a clear need for, and a real value in, providing small grants funding through the overarching ESF programme. In each region programmes were significantly oversubscribed, and a high proportion of those turned down for funding were organisations that met the eligibility criteria and had proposed suitable, needed projects. Grants Managers across the regions report that around 90% of the projects funded were successful (ie, delivered planned work and achieved their targets). Our own review of local and regional reports supports the proposition that with relatively small grants many organisations have been enabled to deliver creative, high quality projects that have positively engaged with some of the most disadvantaged individuals and groups in their local community; and certainly reaching many who would not or could not engage with other mainstream providers.

Regions' data on the profile of beneficiaries/learners shows the effective reach of funded projects to highly disadvantaged groups, and there is much anecdotal evidence captured in case studies to further support our conclusion that projects have reached individuals who had not previously been able to engage successfully elsewhere. We found many powerful "first time" stories describing how beneficiaries had not previously been in touch with other employment/training providers, or if they had been, they had not had a positive experience. For instance, people commonly reported their experience with a community grants-funded project as the first time they felt trusted or valued; the first time they felt they could achieve something in a learning environment; the first time they had completed a course; the first time they had received a qualification; or the first time a

worker had taken time to get to know them as a person, and their personal challenges, before suggesting an option to them.

The funded projects have achieved a range of positive and important outcomes for their beneficiaries, and have acted as an important stepping stone for many individuals in their journey closer to engagement in the workforce whether through paid work, volunteering, education or training. This is reflected in project reports and some of the moving personal testimonies shared by project beneficiaries:

***“My mobility is impaired and I have difficulty expressing myself. I needed help to improve my confidence ... The training I’ve received has changed my life around. I’ve had help with my speech, reading, writing, and attending the sessions has given the confidence to mix and socialise with others.”*** (stroke survivor who has gone on to fulfil her ambition to go to college)

***“I’m not a very confident person at all and was a recluse before, not mixing with anyone other than my children. I now have new friends. I can actively participate as a group or as individual on whatever task we’ve been set ... This class has turned out to be the best thing I have ever done in many years and I wish I’d known about it years before ... I would highly recommend it to all as it’s been a life changer for me and will change my future now for the better. My outlook on life for the future now has aims and targets and hope. Thank you very much.”*** (single parent participant in IT course who has gone on to further training)

## **Conclusion 2**

More than ‘type’ of activity, an important determinant of the success of small organisations in delivering results has been their approach, and in particular the value placed on building positive one-to-one relationships with beneficiaries.

Our research suggests that type of activity may be less associated with the positive outcomes of funded projects than the projects’ ethos or approach, though the relevance and effectiveness of different types of intervention would be an interesting topic for further study (see Conclusion 5 below). Successful projects appeared to have in common one or more of the following characteristics that set them aside from many larger or ‘mainstream’ providers:

- an informality of approach and a trusted reputation and/or relationship with the target beneficiaries/learners;
- an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the issues and barriers of different beneficiary groups, and of relevant local context or issues;
- the adoption of flexible, tailored and holistic approaches – focused on

beneficiaries' individual needs, seeing them as individuals and not 'types';

- the drive, commitment and relevant experience and knowledge of the individuals leading or delivering projects, who often shared a background or common experience with the client group;
- an active and real commitment to inclusive practice, valuing people and embracing diversity - which in turn contributed to making people feel welcome and able to participate and benefit from the support or activities offered;
- the offer of practical and real world learning opportunities so that people felt they were really gaining from a meaningful experience;
- a keenness to recognise, value and celebrate people's achievements – something which was particularly important for the high proportion of beneficiaries who lacked any formal educational qualifications of any type.

### **Conclusion 3**

The approach and expertise of local grants management bodies made an important contribution to the success of funded projects, with partnership working, strong local knowledge and a supportive ethos all playing an important part.

Through our research we were able to identify common characteristics of the way the programme was managed in local areas that played an important part in contributing to the high level of success of funded organisations. These were primarily:

- establishing a well-informed and supportive assessment process that benefited from the input, local knowledge and contacts of networks of delivery partners and helped ensure that appropriate projects were selected;
- adopting a 'funder-plus' approach - combining the role of funder and enabler and offering capacity-building support. Grants managers, their colleagues and partners tried hard to establish supportive and positive relationships with funded groups so that they felt able to communicate openly and approach them with any concerns or challenges encountered along the way;
- offering early and, where possible, ongoing support to help groups meet reporting requirements was particularly important as it was the one area that groups were most likely to find challenging;
- at the local level, emphasising to groups the value of soft outcomes, and the importance of quality of engagement as well as targets, outputs and numbers, proved valuable. This approach helped at least some organisations avoid the common problem of 'over promising' what they could deliver and then worrying that they were failing despite actually achieving good outcomes for their target client group.

#### **Conclusion 4**

A more focused and streamlined approach to programme monitoring and reporting could have added to efficiency and outcomes, and would have enabled the programme both nationally and regionally to better and more easily answer important questions about performance, value and impact.

We found that the reporting requirements placed on funded projects and grants management bodies in local areas were at best unhelpful (overly complicated and time-consuming), and at worst a potential barrier to delivery and performance. They were the most common source of complaint from funded organisations, and some Grants Managers felt reporting requirements were disproportionate to the level of funding and/or not necessarily focused on the right things. There was also a lack of clarity about whether or not data being collected was actually being analysed or used nationally, which contributed to some frustration at the regional and local level.

The negative consequences of monitoring and reporting systems that could have been better focused, simplified or streamlined were:

- stress about the amount and complexity of paperwork at project and co-ordinating body level;
- capacity-building resources were more focused on support with reporting than anything else. This was assessed as being to the detriment of other possibly important areas of support such as improving the quality of learning provision and the quality of the learner experience, or supporting small providers to engage with accreditation options;
- some projects fed back that reporting ate into time that they may have better used for delivery or development activity; and
- overall it has been difficult to answer important questions about the programme's delivery, value and impact because there has been a mismatch between the information collected and either areas' capacity to analyse it, or the type of information that would have been most useful. For instance, areas might have data on the number of people registering with a project but not on the number completing the course/activity; have only anecdotal evidence and case studies regarding important soft outcomes; or have a lot of rich data on individuals' distance travelled / learning but lack the time to analyse or make sense of it.

#### **Conclusion 5**

There are a number of areas where we felt further research and evaluation might add to understanding about the value of small grants programmes of this type and/or of the value of community-based organisations as providers of services to disadvantaged groups.

During the course of our research, and during discussions with Grants Managers, we were able to identify a couple of areas where it was felt further research might be helpful – that is, it might help generate a more in-depth understanding of the value of small grants, the value and possible added value of funding smaller community-based organisations, and/or our understanding of what works in moving disadvantaged individuals closer to the workforce.

***Exploring further the efficacy of different types of intervention or activity.*** We identified a number of project characteristics that appeared to be linked to success, but we were not able to match outcomes or performance data to any kind of typology of project activities – for instance, to assess the relative merits of different interventions. We came to the conclusion that further analysis of the data on funded projects and their outcomes might reveal more useful insights and learning about success factors, about what works, and about what kinds of intervention get the best results, for which groups or individuals, and in what circumstances

***Exploring further the impact of the projects and/or the wider programme.*** We were able to conclude that for many individuals community grants-funded projects have contributed to increased confidence and self-belief; they have addressed skills gaps; helped disadvantaged individuals tackle some of the personal, social and economic barriers to their inclusion in their community and in their local workforce; and helped many set and achieve important goals in their journey towards meaningful occupation on their own terms. Some individuals report that the interventions and support offered by projects have been life-changing. For communities, projects have developed resources and services; improved facilities and local environments; and increased levels of volunteering and participation in many areas of community life for the benefit of many more than simply those recorded as project beneficiaries/individual learners. Though the evidence we found was powerful and persuasive, it was outside the scope of our study to try to more robustly assess or quantify these outcomes. We believe there is potential for a more in-depth study of the impact of the projects, for instance a longitudinal or follow-up study looking at the longer-term outcomes for a sample of beneficiaries/learners and/or a sample of organisations, or an in-depth focus to explore the added value or social value of projects in regards to the ‘ripple effect’ of achieving additional, unplanned outcomes that generate wider benefit for individuals or communities.

Despite identifying these areas for further research and suggesting some of the limits to the questions that we could legitimately address within the scope of our own study, we hope that this report has been able to provide at least a flavour of some of the Community Grants Programme’s key achievements and learning, and that we have captured something of the value of funding small community projects to bring about positive gains in the capacity of individuals and of local communities.

## Appendix 1 – Sample and dataset

Each region engaged positively with our research though levels of participation varied. The gaps in the table below do not reflect a lack of engagement but rather that regions either:

(a) had less complete information to share (as their programme was still running or because their final report and/or evaluation had not yet been completed); and/or

(b) had less capacity to engage in interviewing and case study development processes because of other pressing local demands (eg, audit processes being underway during the time of our fieldwork).

	Interviews	Project list	Project descriptions	Evaluation report	End of Grant report
1. North West	✓	✓	✓	✓	x
2. Yorks & Humber	✓	✓	x	✓	x
3. South West	✓	✓	✓	✓	x
4. South East	✓	✓	✓	x	x
5. East of England	x	✓	✓	x	✓
6. East Midlands	✓	✓	✓	✓	x
7. West Midlands	✓	✓	✓	✓	x
8. North East	x	x	x	✓	x
9. Cornwall & Scilly	x	✓	✓	x	x

NCVO, January 2014

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