



‘Was it worth it?’

***Research report on the Project Towpath
Community Grants initiative by the
‘Taking Part’ Capacity Building Cluster
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The ‘*Was it Worth It ?*’ research placement was developed, in conjunction with the Community Audit and Evaluation Centre (CAEC) based at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) and Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation (GMCVO), to explore the effectiveness of the *Community Grants – Project Towpath* initiative.

The Towpath initiative, funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), is part of a wider scheme known as the ‘Community Grants Programme’ which seeks to support smaller Third Sector organisations with close links to excluded and disadvantaged communities. ‘Project Towpath’ provides grants of up to £12,000 to small voluntary sector groups based in Greater Manchester. The projects and groups supported use innovative solutions and methods to engage the hardest to reach people to make the positive steps needed to become “job ready”. They help break down social, cultural and confidence barriers which stand in the way of sustainable employment.

The research placement was funded as part of the Taking part? ESRC Capacity Building Cluster, (2008-2013)’ in which Manchester Metropolitan University is one of the 3 participating Universities. The Cluster has a particular emphasis upon enabling the voices of the most disadvantaged groups to be heard effectively, as part of wider agendas for social change, social solidarity and social justice.

Aims of the Project

Due to the amount of different stakeholders involved in the study, a number of aims and objectives have shaped the project as a result of the varying ‘agendas’ and perspectives. Consequently whilst there were general themes which defined the project for example:

- how the individual projects worked
- the benefits and challenges for those involved in taking part
- identification of the outcomes and impact for the sponsoring agency, delivery partners and participants
- recommendations for future priorities

there were also additional themes to consider which the host organisation, GMCVO, were keen to explore including:

- Understanding and evidencing the impact of the Towpath funding on participating organisations and individuals;
- Identifying and developing 'practical', 'applied' knowledge that can help small third sector organisations improve their practice;
- Exploring the ways in which different communities experience the project, civil engagement, informal and formal participation.

Methodology

In order to capture the inextricably linked yet distinctive challenges raised by the above aims and objectives, it was crucial that the research design and methodology were 'fit for purpose'. Due to the complexities of the project, both in terms of timescales and number and foci of participants involved, a 'traditional' impact evaluation was felt inappropriate. Instead due to the depth of engagement and interaction between the researcher and GMCVO, particularly with the staff most closely working on Project Towpath, the study became more of an ethnographic insight into the extent to which the host organisation engaged with the community it supports. In this way the study also hoped to develop understandings and knowledge that might impact beyond the immediate object of the study.

The framework of the study was defined around four key stages:

- a *descriptive* phase, exploring what was done and accounting for the experiences of those involved;
- an *evidential* stage, which provided an account of the impact of the project as recorded by the research,
- a *reflective* stage, which considered the ways in which people thought about the project and the experience as a whole; and
- a *critical* stage, which explored the wider learning that could be drawn from the experience, grounded in the data and reflections provided

Following an initial documentary analysis, a questionnaire was sent to all organisations who had applied for a grant (whether successful or otherwise) to determine their experiences of the process. 24 were completed and returned – 18 from funded groups and 6 from non-funded groups. Interviews and focus groups (5) were also conducted with infrastructure organisations and support agencies such as GMCVO as well as with representatives (9) of groups funded through Project Towpath. Additional data was compiled via further observation work with 3 of these groups as well as one detailed individual meeting and 2 larger discussion events.

In addition, it was felt useful to engage with the other organisations which also held *Community Grants* funds in the five North West sub-regions. Interviews were

conducted with *Cheshire & Warrington Learning Together* and *Community Foundation for Merseyside*, while the Community Grants project based in Cumbria provided information regarding the projects they have funded. This proved to be a valuable exercise as it enabled the activities taking place in Greater Manchester to be understood in a wider, comparative context.

Key Findings

Overview

1. A high volume of applications (170 applications totalling approximately £1.8 million – roughly three times the available fund, which was around £630,000) were received for Project Towpath – subsequently a large number were unable to receive support. Some project workers felt that target numbers had been set too high initially and that as a result they had to re-negotiate the objectives of their initiative.
2. In terms of the number of projects funded, this is, unsurprisingly, directly related to the size of the fund available, thus the Greater Manchester project held by GMCVO has delivered nearly twice as many projects as Cheshire & Warrington, and six times as many as Cumbria.
3. In Cumbria, the average grant awarded was approximately £8,600, and in Cheshire & Warrington, approximately £7,225. These compare to an average grant of £9,935 in Greater Manchester, suggesting that the larger ‘pot’ available in this sub-region has provided for a slightly greater level of fiscal support to slightly fewer organisations, relative to the size of each fund.
4. Over half of the groups funded in Cheshire & Warrington related either to disability or were projects targeting women; in Greater Manchester the corresponding proportion was just over one-fifth. Conversely, the latter of these two regions focussed largely on groups supporting BME groups and young people (around 40% of the total number of projects supported), whereas Cheshire & Warrington supported a smaller number relating directly to young people and no projects working exclusively with BME groups.
5. Organisations felt more could have been done to publicise the initiative to a more diverse range of groups.
6. Some organisations did not wish to be associated with what they believed were politicised agendas as they saw it as a threat to the relationships they had developed with their client groups.
7. Through this investment more than 1000 learners (across 63 projects – eventually 43) were supported via opportunities provided by Towpath-funded organisations. Given the fact that projects had to be innovative and address communities and needs not accommodated in mainstream provision, it is fair to imply that a significant number of these learners would not have engaged with alternative forms of learning had these projects not been in existence.

Impact on Learners

1. The majority of participants felt they had benefited in a number of ways as a result of the initiative – particularly in terms of building confidence and self-esteem, the opportunity to meet new people, learning new skills e.g gardening and planning a future e.g enrolling at University and various training programmes, entering employment, joining a volunteering scheme
2. This demonstrates the issues affecting some of the learners working under the auspices of Towpath projects, and the way in which such first-steps engagement is a necessary and valuable tool for re-integrating individuals into wider, more mainstream experiences.
3. Disengaged members of the community valued something which was 'local' and 'relevant' to them
4. In terms of negative feedback, some practical concerns were raised by participants around poor facilities, poor planning and timetabling. There were also some issues raised about the size of groups and the levels of participation and engagement from other learners.

Impact on Third Sector Organisations

1. Organisations perceived Project Towpath as being a valuable and rewarding experience, primarily because of the new work the fund had enabled, and the impact that these groups subsequently perceived in the learners they had engaged with.
2. The majority of organisations reported a clear and definite impact on the people they worked with, whether in terms of 'soft' outcomes (e.g. confidence and self-esteem) and skills (e.g. team-working) or more specific and practical competencies (e.g. computer literacy, language, writing).
3. Issues of recruitment and retention were an issue – engaging learners from excluded communities and maintaining regular attendance was a challenge but one which organisations overcame through compromise and flexibility
4. The notion of developing organisational capacity amongst smaller third sector groups emerged as one of the key aspects of the project. Smaller groups such as those targeted by Project Towpath struggle in terms of planning and securing funding as they lack capacity. They often simply do not have the resources available to put administrative systems in place in order to effectively monitor and evaluate their work.
5. As a result, Towpath was not merely about providing funding to support learners, but about developing the ability of the local not-for-profit sector to access other funding streams, and to develop the competencies and experiences that would make more sustainable practices a possibility.
6. Most groups reported the development of new or stronger links either within the sector or with mainstream providers and public sector organizations

7. Seven of the 18 organisations that responded stated they had gained new volunteers as a result of their Towpath-funded projects.
8. Groups valued the unique developmental support that was given in the production of funding bids to Towpath, and follow up e.g. that enabled them to reapply if they were initially unsuccessful, or to complete monitoring requirements.

Recommendations

1. There is a sector-wide need in terms of developing the necessary capacity and competencies to ensure that smaller third sector organisations have access to a diverse range of funding streams.
2. Greater implementation of small scale, locally-rooted projects with a specific set of aims and objectives, supported by an administering body should be implemented.
3. The support requirement of such initiatives is often intensive, requiring the need for basic administrative support, to be separated from an ongoing developmental and capacity building role.
4. Organisations such as GMCVO are well placed to act as a mediator between the local third sector community and the external funding agencies as they have the skills and the systems in place to support smaller organizations meet the necessary funding demands and requirements.
5. Through such initiatives as Project Towpath greater collaborative links could be developed between the Third Sector and mainstream providers.
6. Third Sector organisations need to be more 'vocal' and promote their work to the wider sector. Local, grass-roots organisations know their communities well, they understand the needs of their clients, and understand how to best engage with and support them. This is an area which needs to be developed further and could form the basis of a future research study.