

**Evaluation of the Covid grant-making response of the
Community Foundation in Northern Ireland,
March – September 2020**



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Contents

1.0	Executive Summary	3
2.0	Introduction and Background	7
3.0	Strategic Context	9
4.0	Methodology	12
5.0	Survey Findings	15
6.0	Stakeholder Consultations	27
7.0	Alignment with the Community Foundation's Strategic Aims	33
8.0	Case Studies	35
9.0	Conclusions	38
10.0	Recommendations	40
Appendices		43
Appendix 1 – Outcomes Statements		44
Appendix 2 – Data Collection Plan		45
Appendix 3 – Survey Questionnaire		50
Appendix 4 – List of Interviewees		55
Appendix 5 – Sources of Covid-Response Funding		56
Acknowledgements		57
Notes and References		58

1.0 Executive Summary

Background and approach

The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland's mission is to 'connect people who care, with causes that matter' and in March 2020, the appearance of a new virus on a pandemic scale, created a cause that mattered deeply, affecting everyone, everywhere, but not all equally.

It is perhaps not surprising, given its mission, that the Community Foundation took a leading role in the local response to what became known as COVID-19. Between March and September 2020, the Foundation attracted and distributed over £5million to voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations across Northern Ireland to enable them to respond to the needs of people in their communities. A further almost £3million was donated up until the end of March 2021 from funds including the Comic Relief Community Support Programme and the Department for Communities Arts Fund. These additional funds fall outside the scope of this evaluation.

Acknowledging the unique nature of the pandemic and its impact on society and seeing the potential to learn from the actions taken at that time, in August 2020, the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland commissioned this evaluation report, with the following objectives in mind:

1. To **listen and identify learning** in relation to the Community Foundation's Covid response, and to develop and support its network of grantees, as well as **make recommendations for how future funds and programmes could be adapted** to incorporate this learning.

2. To **assess the longer-term impact** of the Foundation's, and the community response, as well as the Covid crisis, on organisations, end-users and the wider community sector, and **link potential actions to the Community Foundation's strategic areas**.

Having successfully tendered for the project, GIRAFFE Associates started work in October 2020, gathering the evidence, facts and opinions that would go into the creation of this report.

The remit for the evaluation element of the project was to reflect on how the Community Foundation's response has contributed to its strategic areas and values, with particular focus on the initial funds that provided dedicated short to medium term support linked to the coronavirus crisis:

- The Coronavirus Community Fund
- The Older People's Fund (Previously the Turkington Fund)
- The No Child Goes Hungry Programme supported by Comic Relief
- The New Needs Fund

Between them, these funds resulted in donations of over £5million across 745 grants to 641 groups during the period in question. The scope of the evaluation included the identification of key policy lessons for wider dissemination, and setting the work and impact of the funds in the wider policy context.

In undertaking the evaluation, we employed a mixed method approach, comprising secondary desk research and both quantitative and qualitative primary data collection. The evaluation framework developed for structuring the data collection can be seen on page 14 of this report, with the full data collection plan included as Appendix 2.

Key findings

An extensive survey to 617 grantees in December 2020 received 248 responses – a 40% response rate. Through this survey, follow-up interviews with 33 key stakeholders during January and February 2021 and further targeted discussions with groups of 60–70 grantees at Network meetings during the same months, we developed a clear picture of the impact of Covid on communities of both geography and interest during 2020.

We explored the **role played by the Community Foundation** as a key funder during the emergency response stage and found overwhelmingly positive feedback about the speed, agility and flexibility of its approach. Grantees and funders alike praised the Foundation's ability to connect with groups and target support where it was most needed – using streamlined, simple processes that other funders often cannot implement – particularly government. As a conduit for emergency funding and support, the Community Foundation was seen by all stakeholders we engaged, to have been highly effective and efficient in its response.

The **impact on VCSE groups**, many of whom exist to support and help the most vulnerable in our society, was significant and wide-ranging. Almost 50% had to stop delivering at least half of their usual services and either move online (where possible) or adapt to meeting new needs in their communities. Many did this in the initial stages by engaging in the delivery of food parcels or meals, sometimes replicating efforts by the local Councils and sometimes helping to coordinate these. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest there was some **duplication** during this phase – both of food and potentially of funding, but likewise, an acknowledgement from most surveyed or interviewed that we were in unprecedented circumstances and unlikely to get through without some miscalculations. Thanks to evaluation

work such as this project and other communication channels, this is something that can be learned from should we find ourselves in similar circumstances in the future.

Alongside the (relatively) small instances of duplication, the Covid response also generated more **collaboration** in many communities and likewise between funding bodies and between funders and government. Among grantees, a rating of 6 was given in the survey when asked on a scale of 0–10 to rate the collaboration groups saw or participated in during this time.

The **creativity and resilience** of the VCSE sector shone through during this evaluation, with groups adapting quickly and resolutely in most cases, to find new ways to engage their beneficiaries. Just over half (52.5%) of survey respondents didn't have all the skills they needed to adapt and faced a range of challenges – chief among them being how to engage and communicate with their beneficiaries in the face of the restrictions imposed on people's movements at this time.

The vast majority of survey respondents also felt that their pandemic response had helped build their capacity and resilience, with an average score of 8 on a scale of 0–10. Over 70% cited "broadening skills and knowledge" and "pulling together better as a team and being more effective" as positive outcomes of their experience.

In recognition of some of the systemic issues in our society, the Community Foundation's funding is organised under 5 key themes:

- Advancing people's physical and mental **health, wellbeing and safety**
- Promoting reduction of **isolation** and **disadvantage** and access to local services

- Connecting people with the **arts, culture and heritage**
- Improving life skills, **education, employability and enterprise**
- Maximising ability to strengthen **community cohesion** and build **social capacity**

We explored the continued relevance of these themes with survey respondents and found them to be pertinent and broad enough to meet current needs. As we continue to evolve and work our way through the impacts of Covid on society in the coming months and years, their relevance should of course be kept under review and be open to adjustment if required.

The final section of our survey and a focus of all interviews and discussions was on **the future challenges facing society and the VCSE sector**. For wider society, there is widespread concern that instances of anxiety and poor mental health will increase across all age groups. The toll exacted by Covid does not stop at lives lost to the virus. It extends to many lives negatively impacted by the removal of physical connection and support and the impact that can have on **mental ill health, isolation and loneliness**. Widespread job losses are expected when the furlough scheme ends and this will have both financial and emotional impacts on people, families and communities. It is likely this will lead to increased need for support services and many groups are concerned about their ability to meet demand. This is not only because of the precarious nature of funding for the sector under normal circumstances, but is amplified by the expected loss or reduction of many funding sources in 2021 and beyond in light of the injections of emergency funding made in the past year.

For the VCSE sector itself, a major concern is groups' ability to 'deal with Covid' and get their services back on track while **engaging people safely**. Perennial concerns over funding, in particular **core funding**, are intensified by the knowledge that cuts will have to come on the back of all the money pumped into the sector in 2020/'21.

Although 63% of survey respondents reflected optimism about the future, claiming theirs to be 'reasonably' or 'very' secure, this question was asked in December 2020, before the current extended lockdown was implemented and it is reasonable to expect that a poll taken now might generate a less positive result.

A resounding call from VCSE organisations during the Network meetings was for government to fully **recognise and value the role the sector played** in the pandemic response. It was summed up in a request for government to "Value, respect and work in partnership with the VCSE sector". This recognition of the need for a new narrative and relationship between government and the sector came out in interviews with both grantees and government representatives and is acknowledged by NICVA's work on creating a Manifesto for Change¹ which is out for consultation at the time of writing.

Conclusions

Our conclusions, based on the findings outlined are provided in full on pages 38-39 and can be summarised as follows:

- The VCSE sector spearheaded the response to Covid.
- The Community Foundation's fast and flexible funding response was critical.
- Some lessons can be learned re: duplication and a more measured approach.
- Where collaboration occurred, there's a need to harness positive momentum.
- The relationship between government and the VCSE sector needs reframing.
- The sector needs help to build resilience and capacity and become sustainable.
- The Foundation's Grantee Network can help give the sector a valuable voice.

Recommendations

In analysing the findings and conclusions developed for this report, we formulated a series of 10 recommendations which can be found on pages 40-41 and which are summarised here under the following five headings:

1. Build on the Community Foundation's commitment to be agile and flexible
2. Develop new relationships between funders
3. Create a new narrative between government and the VCSE sector
4. Undertake ongoing monitoring and respond to societal needs
5. Encourage and support collaboration in the VCSE sector

2.0 Introduction and Background

The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (the Community Foundation/the Foundation) is an independent funding body that ‘connects people who care, to causes that matter’.

For over 40 years, the organisation has been a trusted broker, enabling donors to securely give and impact positively on local communities and issues that most need their help.

Within its current strategy, to 2024, the Foundation has five strategic priorities:

- Inspiring generosity
- Building sustainable communities
- Community voice and innovation
- Thriving after the conflict
- People on the edges

In recent years, the Community Foundation has adopted Lean principles as part of an ongoing process of organisational transformation. This commitment to doing things efficiently, flexibly and to being responsive to the needs of customers underpins the procurement of this evaluation.

The Community Foundation procured this work in August 2020, setting out in their tender document the following terms of reference:

The **objectives** for the contract are:

1. To **listen and identify learning** in relation to the Community Foundation’s Covid response, and to develop and support its network of grantees, as well as **make recommendations for how future funds and programmes could be adapted** to incorporate this learning.
2. To **assess the longer-term impact** of the Foundation’s, and the community response, as well as the Covid crisis, on organisations, end-users and the wider community sector, and **link potential actions to the Community Foundation’s strategic areas**.

With the following key **outputs** to be delivered:

- Develop a **network of grantees**, and deliver a programme that both develops, provides initial support to, and engages with that network.
- Collate **qualitative and quantitative data** to report on the Foundation’s covid response.
- Measure the **impact of the programmes of support** on the target communities and on the wider policy environment.
- Highlight the **learning and best practice** from both the Foundation’s practice, as well as projects and participants, presenting these in various formats, including case studies and longitudinal studies.
- Make **interim recommendations** for actions to enhance the progress of participants and project delivery.

- **Reflect on the learning arising**, the contribution to the Foundation's strategic priorities and values, and its potential contribution to the development of future policy and initiatives.

GIRAFFE Associates submitted a proposal and was successfully appointed to undertake the work, starting on 5 October 2020 for a 6-month period until March 2021.

The main body of the primary data collection work was carried out between December 2020 and February 2021, with the first two months focused on desk research and consultation with key stakeholders to inform and shape the data collection plan and methods.

3.0 Strategic Context

In March 2020, a global pandemic of a scale, complexity and longevity no-one could have foreseen, brought life as we knew it, to a point of change. Everyone, regardless of age, occupation, gender, race, location, income or beliefs, would be affected by the coronavirus pandemic or, at the very least, by the restrictions governments across the world subsequently applied to our lives and our freedoms.

Here in Northern Ireland, the first of a series of 'lockdowns' was implemented on 23 March 2020, effectively preventing citizens from leaving their homes for anything other than essential reasons. Shops, pubs, restaurants and social gathering places were shut down, leaving only 'essential' trading and workplaces open. Organisations were asked to move their staff to home working where possible and people were encouraged to 'socially distance' when coming into contact with others. We were also urged through public-health messaging on all channels to wash our hands regularly and thoroughly to avoid potential contamination and spread of the disease that would quickly become known as COVID-19.

At a local level, older people and those who were medically vulnerable were advised to 'shield' from the virus by remaining indoors and cutting contact with others. Within many communities, this resulted in some people being unable to get out for shopping, or to collect prescriptions and neighbours and local groups quickly rallied to help those perceived or known to be in need.

It had been clear from mid-March that a health crisis was coming, but the scale and impact were unknown at that stage. In anticipation, the Community Foundation had announced a Coronavirus Community Fund on 15 March to

provide emergency response funding for groups helping those in need. The fund started out at £70k which was swiftly matched by Ulster Garden Villages and further bolstered by £100k from the National Emergencies Trust (NET).

Locally, government quickly realised there was an urgent need to respond and on 20 March, Department for Communities' (DfC) Minister Deirdre Hargey pulled together an Emergencies Leadership Group (ELG) involving local government, other departments and agencies, regional and local level community organisations and delivery groups, Neighbourhood Renewal leads and social enterprise partners.

The Community Foundation was invited to be part of that group, with the initial expectation that theirs would be a coordination role, but it quickly became clear to DfC that the Foundation could play a valuable dual role – as a strategic adviser and a key delivery partner. Up until this point, the Community Foundation had minimal involvement with government, with the exception of a partnership with DfC to promote philanthropy¹. Aside from this, the Foundation had not received or distributed government funding for a number of years, so this marked the start of a relatively new relationship with DfC (and later DAERA).

From the Community Foundation's perspective, it was clear to CEO Andrew McCracken at that first meeting of the ELG that DfC needed a mechanism for getting money out to communities in need, more quickly than government processes would allow. Seeing an alignment with the Foundation's strategic priorities, in that the emergency response contributed across all of them, Andrew McCracken offered the Community Foundation's support in distributing funding quickly and efficiently. It is testament to the organisation's reputation and the trust and confidence that

¹ The Philanthropy Fund is a partnership between DfC and local philanthropists, with five funds of £100k focusing on particular themes. It was agreed pre-Covid and opened for applications in 2020/21.

DfC had in its ability to deliver, that later that same day, Minister Hargey announced £200k funding towards the Community Foundation's Coronavirus Community Fund. Other funders, including DAERA, Bank of Ireland, The ARN Foundation, Citibank, SONI and more quickly came on board and within three weeks, the fund had reached £1million.

By September 2020, over £5million had been distributed by the Community Foundation to 641 groups (785 projects) across Northern Ireland through the following funds:

- Coronavirus Community Fund – 420 grants awarded
- The Older People's Fund – 99 grants awarded
- Comic Relief, No Child Goes Hungry Fund – 19 grants awarded
- New Needs Fund – 247 grants awarded

A full list of the funders whose donations made up these four funds can be found in Appendix 5.

Further funding of almost £3m was donated through funds including the DfC Arts, Culture and Heritage Fund and the Comic Relief Community Support Programme up until the end of March 2021. Those additional funds fall outside the scope of this evaluation.

3.1 The VCSE sector in Northern Ireland

In its February 2020 update to the 'State of the Sector'ⁱⁱ, NICVA profiled the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector as employing an estimated 53,620 people (7% of the NI workforce) across 6,122 organisations. This figure represents only VCSE organisations that are registered with the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland and does not include a number of smaller local community organisations

or those currently awaiting registration.

The same report also estimated there were more than 187,000 'delivery-focused' volunteers working across the sector, not including those operating in governance roles for organisations. It can be reasonably expected that this does not truly reflect the extent of volunteering in Northern Ireland, particularly during the past year when many groups increased their volunteer numbers and many others volunteered locally as part of the emergency response without being explicitly attached to a VCSE organisation.

3.2 Local context

Poverty and mental ill-health, two themes which emerge as key concerns through this evaluation, have long been issues within Northern Ireland and there are concerns that the fallout from COVID-19, economically and socially, will exacerbate both issues further.

In the most recent poverty statistics, published in May 2020 and based on data gathered between April 2018 and March 2019, approximately 303,000 people (16% of the population) were considered to be living in absolute povertyⁱⁱⁱ. Expectations given job losses in the past 10 months and further redundancies still to come, are that this figure will rise in the months ahead. Indeed, of the UK regions, Northern Ireland currently (as of February 2021) has the lowest employment rate, with just 69.4%^{iv}.

Northern Ireland has had higher levels of mental ill health than other regions of the UK for many years, in part attributed to being a legacy of the Troubles. This is often quoted as being around 24%, as in the Community Foundation Vital Signs report published in 2017^v. A more recent survey from the Department of Health puts the

figure closer to 20%^{vi}, but worryingly also points to up to 24% of respondents living in urban areas exhibiting signs of loneliness – something we know has been further intensified by the living conditions people have had to endure over the past year due to the pandemic.

In summary, when the pandemic hit in March 2020, many communities across Northern Ireland were already struggling to deal with a wide range of systemic issues, from unemployment to health issues to low-income levels and educational under-attainment. Evidence suggests that those communities have been further disadvantaged by the impact of the pandemic and that many others, previously unaffected, may now and in the months ahead, find themselves struggling to get by – financially, mentally or in some cases, both.

3.3 The Community Foundation's approach

To help address the biggest issues facing communities, the Community Foundation's funding is organised under the following themes:

- Advance people's physical and mental **health, wellbeing and safety**
- Promote reduction of **isolation** and **disadvantage** and access to local services
- Connect people with the **arts, culture** and **heritage**
- Improve life skills, **education, employability** and **enterprise**
- Maximise ability to strengthen **community cohesion** and build **social capacity**

What this report will explore is not only whether the Community Foundation's approach remains fit for purpose in a post-Covid society, but what we can learn from how the VCSE sector has responded during the pandemic, how funders have engaged with and supported the sector and what further support is needed for the Community Foundation to meet its strategic priorities and continue improving life for people in communities across Northern Ireland.

4.0 Methodology

The process began with the creation of an evaluation framework to capture the outputs, outcomes and impact the Community Foundation wanted to assess. This helped identify the key stakeholders involved and the intended outcomes to be measured as the evaluation developed. It can be seen here on page 13, with more detailed Outcomes Statements available in Appendix 1.

In undertaking the evaluation, we employed a mixed-method approach, comprising secondary desk research and both quantitative and qualitative primary data collection.

Starting with a review of data currently held by the Community Foundation on the grantees that were supported during this time and some interim evaluation work that had been carried out, we moved on to include an extensive survey of grantees for a quantitative base of data and built on this with a range of qualitative stakeholder interviews and focused discussions with grantees at Network meetings.

4.1 Data collection

Primary research was carried out with grantees and other key stakeholders of the Community Foundation in Northern Ireland between October 2020 and February 2021.

The target audience was organisations who applied for/ received funding through one of the following funds between March and September 2020:

- Coronavirus Community Fund
- The Older People's Fund

- Comic Relief, No Child Goes Hungry Fund
- New Needs Fund

This comprised some 641 organisations who received a total of 785 grants across the four funds.

Through a process of consultation and co-design with the Community Foundation, evaluation peers and a small group of up to 20 grantees who constituted what became known as the 'Core Group', an in-depth survey was developed. This addressed views on the Community Foundation as a funder and their processes; the Covid-experience of grantees; the impact funding had on their beneficiaries; their views on the wider VCSE sector and their concerns about the future.

The survey was sent to contacts in 617 organisations² in December 2020 and 248 responses were received, representing a 40% response rate. It featured a mixture of quantitative and qualitative questions and recipients were incentivised to complete it by entering their organisation name into a prize draw for a £500 donation to their organisation. Recipients could choose to remain anonymous if they so wished.

In addition to the data collected from the survey, some 33 interviews were carried out with key stakeholders between January and February 2021, either by telephone or via online video platforms such as Zoom. The breakdown of interviewees was as follows:

- Grantees – 23
- Partners/funders – 7
- Community Foundation key staff – 3

² The automated mailing was attempted to all 641 groups, but failed in 25 cases due to email delivery issues.

A full list of interviewees is provided in Appendix 4. For the grantee interviews, survey respondents nominated themselves as being willing to take part and we selected and invited a cross-section, representing a broad spread across location, impact themes and grant amount. The total amount of grant(s) received by interviewees ranged from £2,500 to £23,243 and all 11 Council areas and 5 impact themes were covered in the interviews that took place.

The partners/funders interviewed represent both independent funders that don't provide funding to the Community Foundation, but with whom a more collaborative relationship developed during this time, and government and independent funders who contributed to the pot of money distributed by the Foundation during the period. It also included two organisations with whom the Community Foundation works in partnership on projects from time to time including during their Covid-response efforts.

In addition to the survey and interviews, informal focus group discussions were held during two Grantee Network meetings in January and February 2021 to further interrogate some of the issues coming out via the other research methods.

Topics discussed at these meetings included how groups had adapted their services and delivery; whether collaboration had been stimulated during the period; what were the key needs in communities now; whether there was a difference in needs and experiences between urban and rural communities and key messages for the NI Executive as they consulted on the next Programme for Government Outcomes.

Before undertaking the primary research, desk research was also carried out, principally focused on the existing data held by the Community Foundation on its grant-making

during this period and specifically focused on the four funds outlined above. This data, held on the Foundation's Salesforce CRM system, included end of grant monitoring reports submitted by the grantees, as well as statistical data covering the range of projects funded.

4.2 Limitations

In relation to the Evaluation Framework (Fig 1), the main limitation was in accessing beneficiaries of the grantees to explore their views. There were two reasons for this – the first being that restrictions on movement and meeting up during the whole period of this evaluation prevented the organisation of targeted focus groups in different areas, as had been planned. Secondly, given the large numbers of groups involved and the GDPR considerations around sharing the contact details of their beneficiaries, it was impractical to get direct access to the many thousands of individuals involved.

To counter this, we asked in the survey if groups had carried out their own evaluations with their beneficiaries and would be willing to share them. A number of groups did so, but given that these groups received funding from a range of sources during this time, it is hard to tie the responses specifically to the Community Foundation funding. To that end, we relied largely on the groups' own views regarding their beneficiaries through the survey and in interviews.

4.3 Network development

In addition, preliminary conversations were held with a small group of grantees to help inform the development of the research and also the creation of a Network for grantees, which was a second element of the brief for this work.

This 'Core Group' comprised active representatives from up to 20 organisations who volunteered to help shape and inform the Network development. Two meetings were held with this group on 10th and 24th November and these helped determine the proposed purpose and role of a Network, which was used to communicate and invite grantees to sign up and attend the first Grantee Network meeting on 13 January 2021.

More than 160 organisations chose to sign up to the Network and are included in any communications regarding meetings or other items of interest to share among Network members. This is a valuable resource and one that should be actively and carefully nurtured to ensure shared value for participants and for the Community Foundation in the future.

Covid-response grants – Evaluation

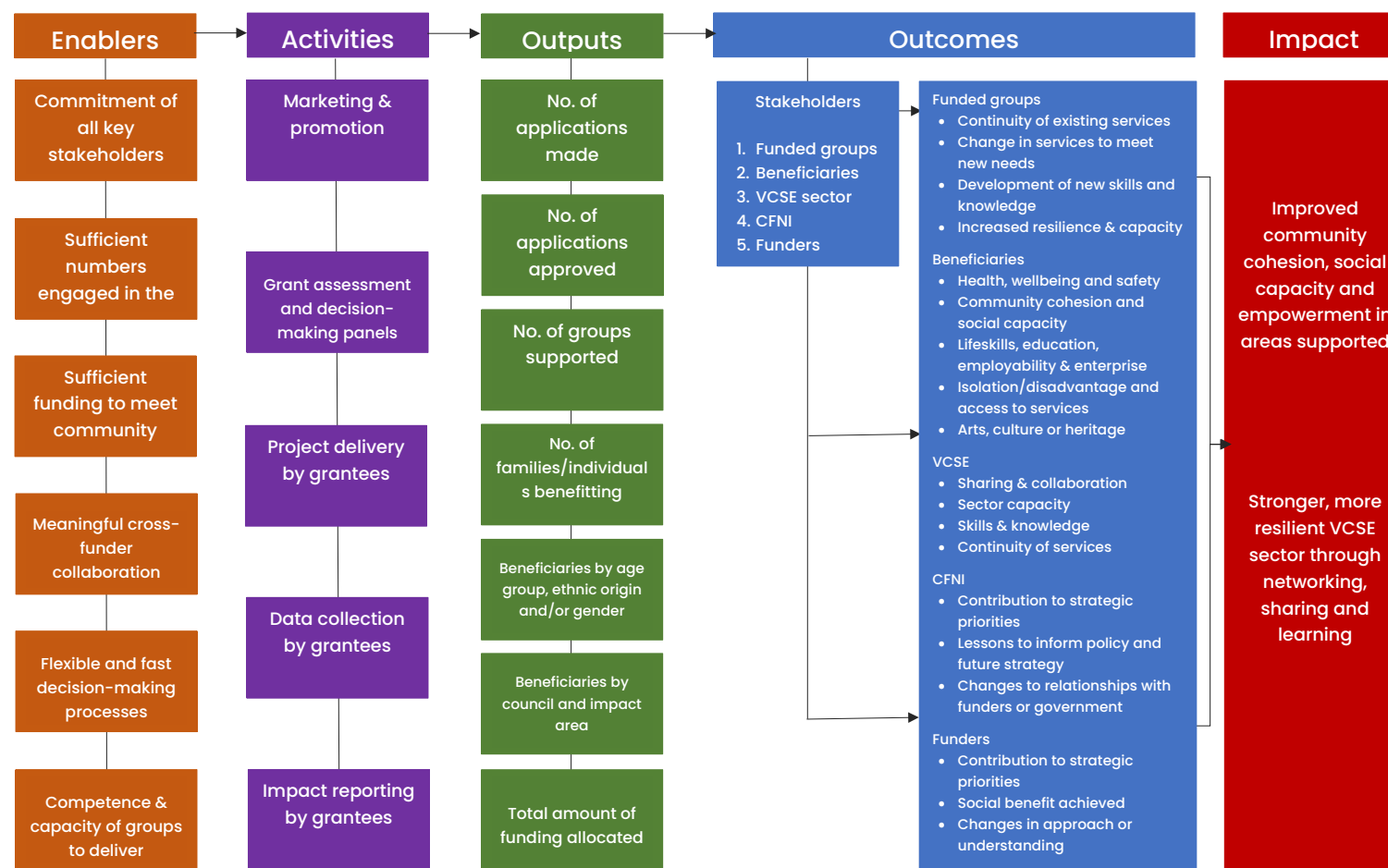


Fig.1: Evaluation Framework

5.0 Survey Findings

A 33-question survey was sent to 617 organisations in December 2020. All recipients had received funding from one of the Community Foundation's Covid-response funds between March and September 2020.

A copy of the survey questions is available in Appendix 3. The survey was split into the following sections:

1. Background
2. The application process
3. Your group's Covid journey
4. Your beneficiaries
5. The Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) Sector
6. Looking to the future

5.1 A profile of respondents

Of the 248 responses received, 63.6% (152) were from charities registered with the Charity Commission for NI, 21% (60) were from community organisations and the status of the remainder was a mixture of company limited by guarantee, charity awaiting registration, community interest company, social enterprise, community/voluntary trust and other types.

Most organisations have a small number of employees – between 1–5 full or part-time (FT/PT) – or are primarily volunteer-led and/or dependent. 59 respondents have no employees while 90 have between 1–5. Only 11 respondents had more than 11 FT staff and 22 had more than 11 PT staff.

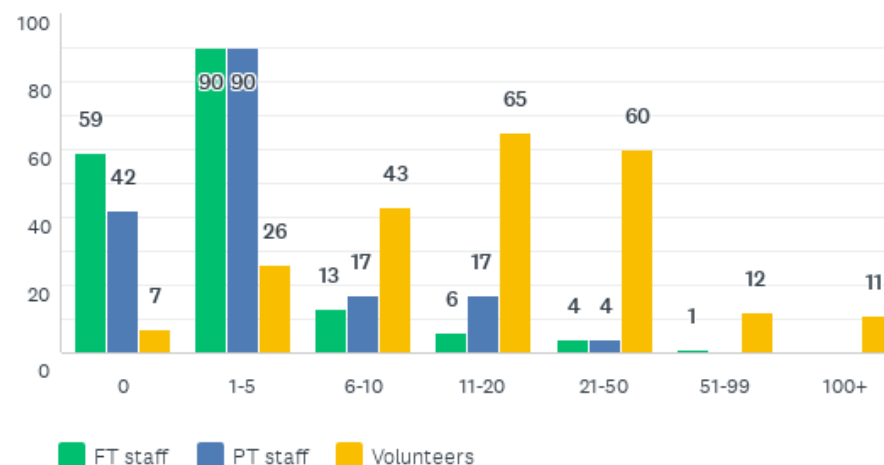


Fig.2: Nos. of staff and volunteers per survey respondent

When asked to describe their primary beneficiaries, many respondents outlined a range of different groups – particularly those operating as community organisations where a range of local needs and groups are being supported. Given the emphasis in the initial Coronavirus Community Fund on supporting older people who may have been isolated or vulnerable during the initial stages of the pandemic, it is not surprising that almost a third of respondents (29.3% or 63) listed older people as beneficiaries.

Children and youths were beneficiaries for 42% (91) of respondents while adults/families were the focus of 34.4% (74) of groups. Almost 8% of respondents (17) had a focus on race or ethnicity as part of their role and mental health or suicide prevention was specifically mentioned by 12 respondents. Disability – both mental and physical, was quoted by 37 respondents (17.2%) and general community support was listed by 39 respondents (18%).



Fig 3: Word cloud of primary beneficiaries for survey respondents

There was a good spread of responses across all Council areas, with the majority of respondents serving Belfast (44) and Derry & Strabane (42). Some 10% of respondents claimed to be province-wide in their delivery and a number cover more than one Council area. The responses broadly reflect the allocation of grants relevant to this survey, with the top 5 Council areas in terms of grants received also being the top 5 by respondents to our survey.

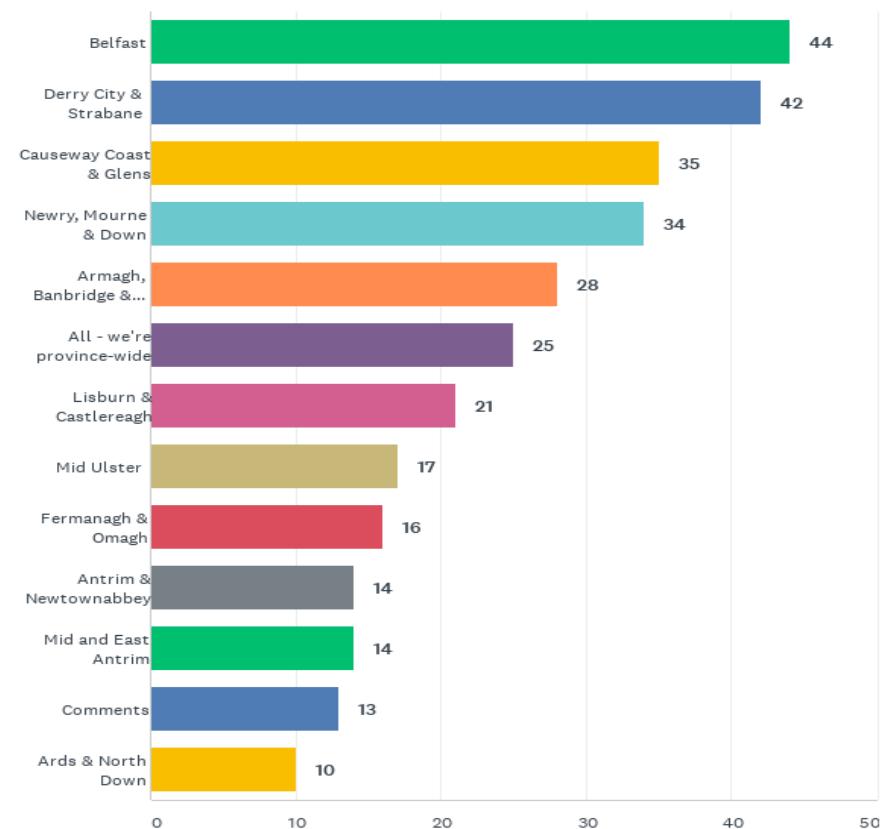


Fig 4: Council areas served by survey respondents

5.2 The Community Foundation as a grant-maker

Organisations were able to apply to more than one fund during this period and quite a number did so. Of the respondents to this survey, 78 applied to more than one fund – not all successfully. 235 people completed the question about which funds they had applied to and how much of their requested funding was approved. Of these, 152 applied successfully to one fund only, 66 applied successfully to more than one fund and 7 were unsuccessful in all their applications.

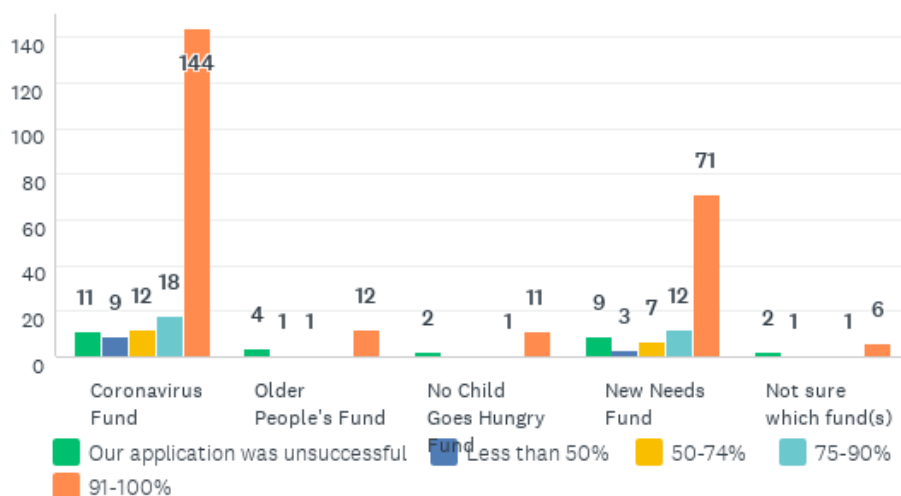


Fig 5: Funds applied to and success rate for survey respondents

Of those who were successful in their applications, at least 60% and up to 78.6% (depending on the fund) received 90%+ of the funding they requested. There were 338 applications across the responses and of these, only 28 were unsuccessful. 34 (10%) received less than three quarters of their requested funding and 81.7% received more than three quarters.

Based on survey responses and feedback during interviews and at Network meetings, the Community Foundation is viewed as a highly efficient and supportive grant-maker. On survey findings alone, when asked how they would rate the application process, respondents gave a weighted average score of 3.9. This equates to 70.5% responding with either 'quite simple' or 'very simple'.



Fig 6: Star rating of grant application process by survey respondents

From the comments accompanying the question, 109 people used the words 'straightforward', 'easy', 'user-friendly', 'clear' or 'simple' in their response, showing a solidly positive attitude towards the funder and its processes. For those who had criticisms, many were directed more generally at the completion of funding applications rather than specific to the Community Foundation.

"The Community Foundation did extremely well and, more so than many of our local councils or other funding bodies, seemed to get the money on the ground where it was needed, much more quickly and efficiently. The simplification and speed of the application process and the cutting through of much of the unnecessary time-wasting red tape is what was required in a time of crisis and other statutory bodies should reflect on their performance in comparison."

Greater Shantallow Community Arts

Furthermore, when asked specifically about the speed of the Community Foundation's response and decision-making, the star rating rose to 4.3, with 89.3% rating it either 'quite' or 'very fast'.

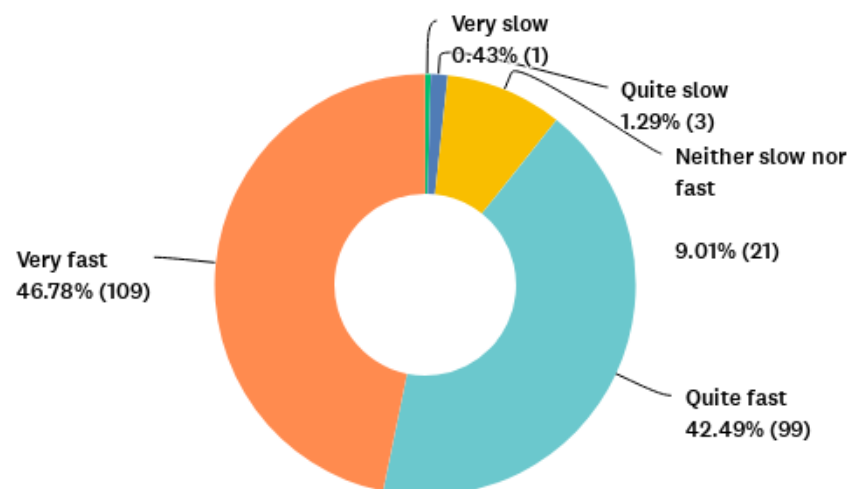


Fig 7: Rating for the Community Foundation's decision-making and response to applications

Finally, in this section of the survey we asked whether there was any element of the Community Foundation's approach or response since March that could have been improved or any feedback.

Overwhelmingly the feedback on this question was positive, with complimentary comments or the answer No or N/A. Of the small number (23) who suggested areas for improvement, comments related to wanting to receive more feedback as part of the process, finding the end of grant monitoring reports time-consuming to complete, technical issues or possible duplication in funding at this time.

5.3 How groups experienced the pandemic

The pandemic brought life as we knew it to a point of critical change in March 2020. As part of this evaluation, we explored how it changed for organisations in the VCSE sector and how they had to adapt their services and/or delivery.

5.3.1 Service-delivery

In the survey we asked to what extent they had to stop delivering their usual services during Covid. The vast majority were affected to some proportion, with fewer than 10% not having to stop at all. Almost a quarter (56) had to stop delivering 75% or more of their services, with a further quarter (55) having to stop more than half their services during this time.

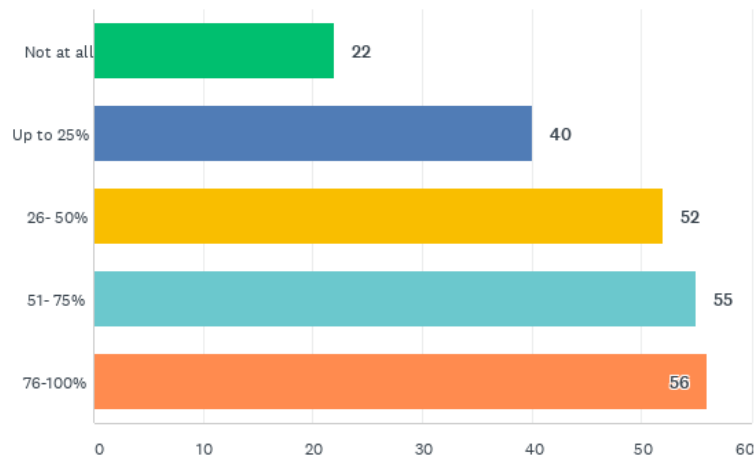


Fig 8: Proportion of survey respondents stopping service-delivery during Covid

The vast majority of survey respondents – almost 94% – claimed that the funding from the Community Foundation was either ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ important in enabling them to continue delivering their services.

Further expanding upon this in comments, it becomes clear that the funding provided by the Foundation and other funders at this time enabled many groups to keep going in some form – often by adapting to the restrictions and meeting new needs in their community.

A lot of groups whose income would historically have been dependent on running events and activities were badly hit by the closure of facilities necessitated by the pandemic, so the funding allowed them to keep their doors open and be a valuable source of local support – often by being creative and learning very quickly to do things differently.

“We had to be creative about delivery of services and the Community Foundation helped us achieve this.”
Atlas Women’s Centre

The words ‘essential’, ‘vital’, ‘critical’, ‘crucial’ were used by 23% of those commenting (98 people) in relation to the funding, while 41% (40 respondents) talked about how it enabled/allowed/helped them to deliver necessary services to their beneficiaries.

5.3.2 Adapting to changing needs

As part of this section of the survey, we explored how groups had seen the needs in their community change since March. We found significant similarities in people’s views, particularly in relation to increased loneliness and isolation and a (sometimes related) growth in mental health issues.

In their comments, some respondents pointed out that as the situation is still ongoing, we may expect to have a clearer picture of the needs in another 12 months’ time. The view was also expressed that we might be feeling the impacts of many of these issues for years to come.

Interestingly, two thirds of respondents chose at least 5 of the 8 options in their response and only 3 people chose a single issue, suggesting the range of needs and problems seen in communities during this period was multi-layered and complex.

5.3.3 Facing challenges

What is encouraging is that almost half (47.5%) of respondents had the knowledge and skills in-house to make the necessary adaptations. 52.5% did not and some of the biggest challenges faced were around communicating effectively with beneficiaries at this time. 72% of respondents claimed this was a challenge for them, while 75% were challenged by the restrictions imposed by social distancing, making it hard for them to engage beneficiaries face-to-face.

As might be expected, finding the funding to meet the needs that arose at this time was also a challenge for over 70% of respondents. Many people faced multiple challenges, as evidenced by the fact that there were 947 options selected by 222 respondents to the question.

In addition to the listed options, respondents commented on other issues such as volunteer burnout; having to work much longer hours to meet the needs; staff and volunteer shortages due to Covid or shielding and challenges engaging older beneficiaries in particular over online platforms such as Zoom, where they didn't have the skills or equipment needed.

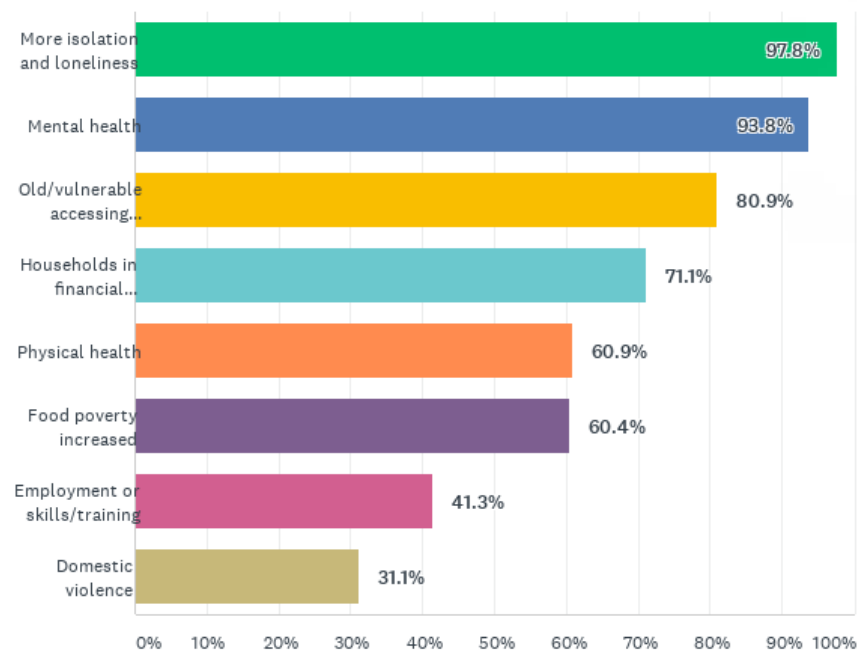


Fig 9: Changing needs in communities by survey respondents

It was clear from our survey that over three quarters of respondents had to change or adapt their services delivery either 'Quite a lot' or 'A great deal'. An error in the original structure of the question pertaining to this issue prevents an accurate reading of the responses, but from the comments it is clear that the restrictions placed on people by government affected the ability of beneficiaries to participate as normal and significant numbers of groups had to adapt to online delivery, where this was feasible.

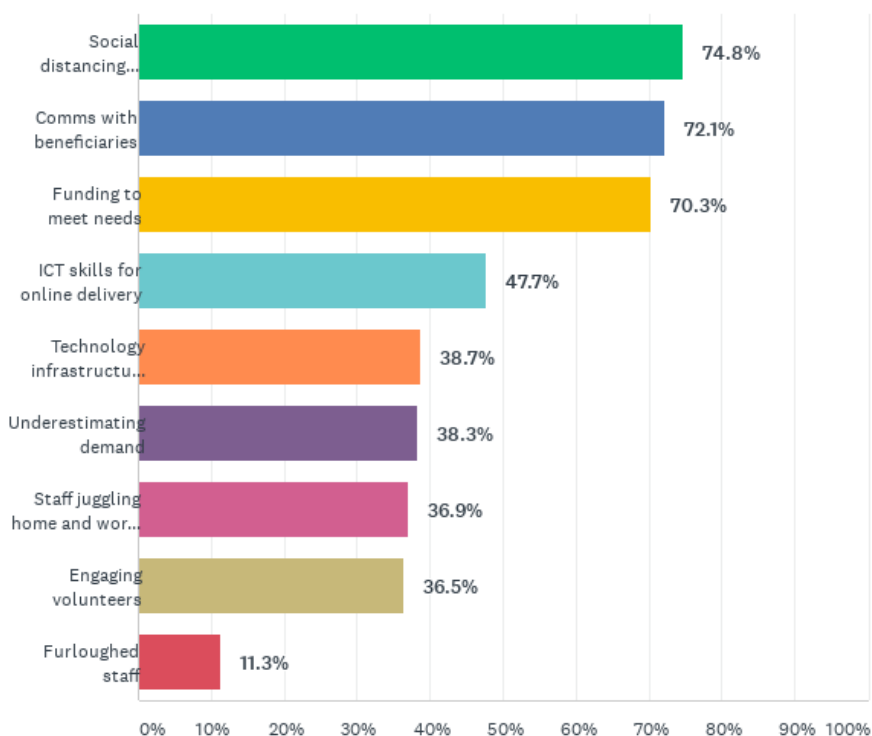


Fig 10: Challenges faced in adapting service delivery

Challenges with broadband connectivity in rural areas was also mentioned by a number of respondents and this was further borne out during the interviews with grantees and at the second Network meeting on 9 February, where the different experiences in rural vs urban areas were explored.

"Poor broadband and mobile phone service in our area made it almost impossible to conduct online meetings."
Eskra Community Association

5.3.4 Building resilience and capacity

When asked 'How much do you think the learning and experience gained during your Covid-response has helped build your organisation's resilience or capacity?', the responses, on a scale of 0-10, averaged out at 8. Indeed, only 35 respondents chose a score of 5 or less and 115 opted for 8 or above.

When asked how their resilience or capacity had improved, the top three answer choices were:

1. We have broadened our skills and knowledge – 71%
2. We have pulled together better as a team and are more effective – 70.5%
3. We are more skilled at working remotely – 68.8%

Just 25 respondents (11.2%) indicated financial savings from reduced overheads were a factor, while 80 organisations (35.7%) had identified new funding and income streams and 57% (128 respondents) had developed creative ways to be efficient. These responses are surely strong indicators of the positive mindset of organisations in the VCSE sector and their ability to adapt and flex with changing circumstances.

In the Grantee Network meetings held in January and February 2021, further evidence of the resilience of the sector came out in discussions around adaptation and change. It was clear that although many organisations had struggled to engage beneficiaries during the lockdown restrictions, equally as many had found ways to expand their reach and influence and to engage with more people than before due to the online nature of their offering, which has no geographic boundaries.

5.3.5 Impact themes

To complete this section of the survey, we asked grantees whether they felt that the Community Foundation's five impact themes covered all the needs they witnessed in their area. The five themes were listed as:

1. Health, wellbeing and safety
2. Community cohesion and social capacity
3. Lifeskills, education, employability and enterprise
4. Isolation & disadvantage
5. Access to connect with the arts, culture or heritage

An overwhelming 88% of respondents (198) answered 'yes', with 25 people (11.1%) choosing 'partly' and 2 people choosing 'no'.

For those that chose 'partly' or 'no', there was an option to suggest additional or replacement themes. A range of suggestions were made, some of which are already covered under the five themes above, such as Mental Health and Poverty. Of the others, Children & Young People was proposed by three people, as was Digital Poverty – a theme that has come more to the fore during the pandemic as people have been forced online for work, school and other forms of engagement.

Race and Language, Capacity of the Sector, Domestic Abuse and Financial Hardship were each mentioned by two respondents and again, some of these could be said to be covered in the existing themes – e.g., Financial Hardship can reasonably be equated with disadvantage.

On the evidence provided, it seems that, broadly speaking, the Impact themes which the Community Foundation is currently focused on are the right and relevant ones to

address the issues being faced in Northern Ireland today. That's not to say the emphasis or focus of some themes might benefit from review or tweaking in the coming year(s), as the full impact of the pandemic becomes apparent.

5.4 The beneficiaries of grantees

Across the four Covid-response funds covered by this report, the three most popular impact themes, between them accounting for some 79% of the funding received by survey respondents, were:

1. Promote **reduction of isolation and disadvantage** and **access to local services**
2. Advance people's **physical and mental health, wellbeing and safety**
3. Maximise ability to **strengthen community cohesion and build social capacity**

This order applies also to the original Coronavirus Community Fund, No Child Goes Hungry Fund and the Older People's Fund individually. This makes sense because these were the first three funds launched as part of the Covid-response and initial emergency response funding was particularly focused on addressing isolation and access to services.

For the New Needs Fund, which came later and was more focused on planning ahead and dealing with the situation beyond the initial emergency, the emphasis changed slightly to make the advancement of physical and mental health, wellbeing and safety the number one priority, accounting for 29% of the funding received by survey respondents.

When asked to what extent organisations felt they had achieved their chosen impact for the beneficiaries of their

services, 88.7% said either 'a lot' or 'a great deal', with 45.7% of the total opting for 'a great deal'. Some respondents backed this up with comments such as:

"Every little impact is a milestone considering the unprecedented time we live in. However, the demand has been more. People depend on organisations like us to overcome food insecurities, to be reassured of their safety due to the pandemic, to counter isolation. These needs are overwhelming and the funds are quickly exhausted before you know it. Also, most volunteers are victims of food insecurities and poverty."
iAssistNI

"We could see the change in their mental health from when we first visited and it improved as the weeks continued, knowing you were coming each week."
The Glens Social Club

5.5 The VCSE Sector

5.5.1 Collaboration and duplication

During a time of crisis, people tend to either come together, joining forces against a common 'enemy' or 'plough their own furrow' in a bid to address the issue quickly. As part of our evaluation, we explored whether VCSE groups had experienced more collaboration or duplication in the course of their Covid-response.

Within the survey, we asked 'How much would you say that VCSE organisations in your area collaborated effectively to respond to community needs?' On a scale of 0-10, the

average was 6, with a median score of 7. 36% of respondents scored this 8 or above and only 13% opted for scores of 3 or below, indicating that the majority of groups witnessed collaboration to some degree during this period. This is borne out in the comments, where a few people outlined how groups in their area worked together to meet local needs.

"The groups worked really well together to identify those in most need of support. There has been greater communication between the local groups since the start of the pandemic. As a result, the local groups are coming together to form a Community Forum to help with the communication process and future collaboration."
Glenelly Development Trust

The need to learn from the experience in order to build resilience was outlined by one respondent and this sentiment underpins the Community Foundation's efforts in undertaking this evaluation and developing a Network to enable the sector to share and learn and grow.

"Organisations shared their details and their projects, but we were all under pressure to deliver for the betterment of the community. A COVID 'Lessons Learned' forum would be beneficial, in my opinion, as we could all share our struggles and successes and map out future planning to insure resilience in times of emergencies."
Men's Action Network

Although there was some indication of duplication, particularly in the initial stages of the response and focused primarily on the distribution of food parcels, this is not strongly reflected within the survey. In response to the

question 'How much would you say there was duplication of efforts by organisations in your area?', using the same 0-10 scale, the average and median responses came in at 3. All of those scoring this question highly and commenting (15 people scoring 8 or more), referred to the distribution of food parcels as the main source of duplication.

"People who received food parcels were often feeling isolated and it was human contact they craved. Whilst extra food deliveries were helpful to many, what people really wanted was someone to show they cared, someone to speak to if they needed or get them something".
County Armagh Community Development

Some respondents did rationalise that a degree of duplication was inevitable in such an unprecedented situation and that as time wore on, issues like that were ironed out.

"Every organisation wished to help and all were initially working in isolation so overlap was bound to be an issue but was soon eradicated"
Aonach Mhacha

Exploring this issue in more depth through interviews, it was clear that some communities pulled together very well to ensure needs were met and the response was well coordinated, and equally clear that in some areas, without a 'lead' group taking charge, there was inevitable duplication and gaps in delivery. It appears that Council/DfC food parcels were also handled differently from area to area, with some being clearly allocated to individual households by the Council and others leaving it for local groups to identify and target those who might be in more need of the support.

There were also concerns that the Council food parcels were in many cases unsuitable for the individuals for whom they were intended. For example, a single pensioner receiving large packets of pasta, jars of coffee and bags of potatoes that they may be unable or unlikely to use. In some instances, local groups took the time to repack boxes more appropriately for the recipient, reducing potential waste and improving suitability.

5.5.2 Capacity and resources

Views on whether the VCSE sector had the capacity and resources it needed to meet the needs of local communities between March and November were mixed in the survey responses. A third of respondents (32.7%) neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement, and a third agreed, with just 10 people (4.7%) agreeing strongly.

29.5% of respondents either disagreed or disagreed strongly, showing a clear split in views. This was explored further in interviews and at Network meetings and our analysis is that groups had quite different experiences at this time, dependent upon their function/role and their beneficiaries. Groups whose beneficiaries were less likely to be comfortable with or have access to online platforms particularly struggled, as did those whose activities depend upon physical contact, such as sporting or art organisations.

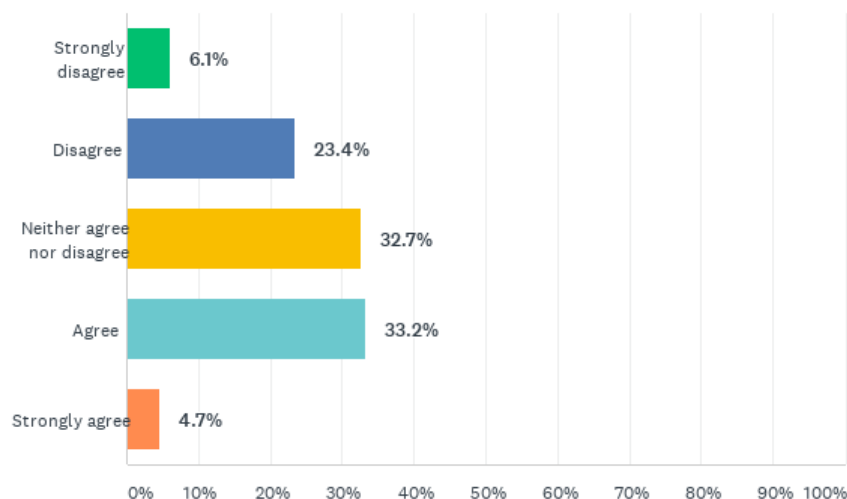


Fig 11: Capacity and resources of the VCSE sector

On the question of how important the additional funding made available to groups at this time was, a resounding majority felt it was either 'very' or 'extremely important' – 96.7% – with 70.5% of the total opting for 'extremely important'.

Again, this was borne out in the interviews and Network discussions, where many groups explained they simply could not have kept their doors open or provided an emergency response within their community, without those additional resources. For many, during the 'second wave' that was marked by the Community Foundation's New Needs Fund, the money was used by many groups to help plan for and facilitate safe reopening of their premises.

"The additional funding was a lifeline. It helped fund our admin, which filled the gap from income not coming in due to pandemic and having to stop events etc. It also funded equipment to help with reopening and being Covid-friendly."
Creggan Country Park Enterprises

5.5.3 Looking to the future

For the final part of our survey, we asked people what they saw as their organisation's top three challenges for 2021 (the survey was carried out in December 2020).

This was an open question, so there was an element of interpretation of the responses in order to 'tag' them and identify patterns and similarities. Once tagged, five issues emerged as being of particular concern to groups and these were further corroborated in the follow-up interviews and indeed in the discussions at Network meetings. Those challenges which are front of mind for VCSE organisations are:

- **Funding and income** – generating core rather than project income is a particular concern
- **Engaging people** – overcoming people's fear and getting them back out safely
- **Service delivery** – in light of restrictions, new needs and in many cases, increased demand
- **Opening safely** – a challenge for many cash-strapped organisations to meet the guidelines and instil the confidence of their beneficiaries
- **Dealing with Covid** – the uncertainties generated by repeated lockdowns and the need to rebuild in many cases

On reflection, the overlap between engaging people, opening safely and dealing with Covid could be interpreted as all being part of the same issue and in that case, that would be the biggest concern for groups, with funding and income a close second. However, the interviews and Network meetings brought concerns over future funding to the forefront of pretty much every discussion, particularly in light of the amount of additional funding provided to the sector in 2020/'21 and the knowledge that this will impact on funding available in the future.

Finally, we explored how secure organisation's felt their future to be, looking a year or so ahead. The results were reasonably encouraging, with the majority – 54.6% – claiming it to be 'reasonably secure' and 8.6% going so far as to say, 'very secure'. Only 7% opted for 'not very' or 'not secure at all', while almost a third (29.7%), hedged their bets and opted for 'it could go either way'.

This reflects an ongoing high degree of uncertainty about the future, but it is important to remember that it is an opinion at a fixed point in time and that attitudes and opinions have been subject to much fluctuation in the past year as the Covid situation has developed. For example, most of the survey responses were made between 4-15 December at a time when we weren't fully aware of the need for the longer-term lockdown measures which subsequently came into effect on 26 December. It is therefore reasonable to assume that were the same question to be asked of respondents at some point in January, February or March 2021, attitudes would differ and are likely to be influenced by where we were at that time in relation to the vaccine rollout and other factors.

In March, to test this assertion, we carried out a small online poll with Network members which received just 29 votes, so isn't statistically significant, but for interests' sake, in that poll, no-one opted for 'not very' or 'not secure at all', while the remaining results were spread as follows:

- It could go either way 13 (45%)
- Reasonably secure 9 (31%)
- Very secure 7 (24%)

This indicates optimism and positivity are still prevailing at the time of writing (March 24th).

6.0 Stakeholder Consultations

The survey provided a broad base of responses from across the sector and we built further on this by carrying out 33 interviews with grantees and other key stakeholders in January and February 2021. We also held targeted discussions at two Grantee Network meetings, which took place via Zoom on 13 January and 9 February 2021. These meetings were attended by 70 and 60 grantees respectively and there was active participation in the topics discussed in smaller 'breakout rooms' during the sessions.

The interviews and discussions allowed us to probe further on the issues raised through the survey and reinforced some of the themes emerging from the survey findings.

6.1 The Community Foundation as a grant-maker

The feedback provided through interviews with 23 grantees echoed the comments made by survey respondents, with the Community Foundation described as 'helpful', 'easy to deal with' and 'one of the best' numerous times and the process of applying frequently referred to as 'straightforward' and 'simple' by numerous interviewees.

A few people commented on how moving to an online application process a few years ago had simplified things greatly and how much easier it had seemed applying for funding during Covid than previously, due to further streamlining of the process. The Community Foundation's flexibility during the period was highlighted frequently through this evaluation and grantees were clearly grateful for the ability to change what they used the funding for, as they found the needs they were trying to meet in local communities were in a state of flux in the early days of Covid.

Just a few constructive comments regarding further improvements were offered, such as streamlining the 'general' background information provided by grantees so that it could be retrieved rather than recreated each time they applied. A small number of groups – mainly those with language barriers or less skilled in using IT, found some issues with uploading evidence as part of the application process, but were able to get assistance with this when they called. As was mentioned by survey respondents, a few people found the production of a final monitoring report to be a little cumbersome, but most recognised the need for some form of accountability and feedback on the impact the funding had enabled.

Speaking to organisations who worked with the Community Foundation as either a funder or partner, there was similarly positive feedback. Both DAERA (the Department for Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs) and DfC (Department for Communities) who contributed to the Covid-response funding distributed by the Community Foundation, were complimentary about their engagement and in particular their ability to get funds out quickly and efficiently as part of the initial emergency response.

Commenting on the role the Foundation played in the Emergency Leadership Group, a senior representative from DfC said:

"The Community Foundation's input and perspective into the discussions was important. Working together as funding partners was also a real positive, as there were times where they could meet the need more quickly and flexibly than government. Being around the table was also useful for them as it helped them to understand some of the pressures and constraints facing government".

This comment also reflects the fact that this was a relatively new relationship and role for the Community Foundation, whose engagement with government had been minimal in the years before the Covid response.

One area of concern raised by partners, funders and indeed the Community Foundation itself is that it cannot fund 'organisations whose purposes include the advancement of religion'^{vii}. This is written into its constitution and stems from a different time, politically and historically, when religion and political or paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland were perceived to be very closely aligned in some cases.

The difficulties caused by this fact during the emergency response were overcome by engaging the Rural Community Network to divert funds to groups that didn't meet the Community Foundation's criteria, which slowed things up somewhat in getting support out to those groups. It may perhaps be timely to revisit this aspect of the Foundation's constitution in line with the appointment of a new Chief Executive later this year following Andrew McCracken's departure in February 2021.

6.2 Impact of the Community Foundation's funding

It is important to note the different intentions behind the initial 'emergency' funding provided by the Coronavirus Community Fund and the longer-term 'coping under Covid' funding characterised by New Needs. For many groups applying during the initial stage, it enabled them to reach out to vulnerable and older people in their area and step outside their usual role to provide food, activity packs, toiletries etc and to ensure that people who couldn't leave their homes during the first Lockdown weren't left without practical support. So, the initial funding wasn't always critical for the survival of the group applying for funding, but it was

critical in order for them to meet the needs they were seeing locally.

When it came to New Needs funding, the focus shifted to helping groups get back to doing what they do and providing their usual services (or meeting new needs related to their service-provision), whilst adhering to and coping with new restrictions. By that stage, during the summer of 2020, it was becoming clear that restrictions would be around for a while and that groups would have to adapt to the changes. New Needs funding was therefore more critical for helping groups get back on their feet and plan for safe reopening, which unfortunately at the time of writing (March 2021), has still not been possible for the vast majority as we are three months into a third Lockdown.

The words 'lifeline' and 'critical' were used repeatedly during interviews when asked how important the funding from the Community Foundation had been to the group during this period. That said, it is recognised that interviewees are going to want to appear grateful for funding and would be unlikely to give anything less than a positive response, saying potentially what they feel the interviewer (and the Community Foundation) would want to hear.

"The New Needs funding was critical to us. We had no capacity and skeleton staff and we needed to reach out and communicate with members and to create resources for doing this."

Girlguiding Ulster

6.3 Recognising the role of volunteers

As can be seen from the survey results, many groups – charities and community organisations – depend heavily on volunteers. Many groups have no paid employees and are fully dependent on volunteers and during this period this created both a challenge and an opportunity for many groups.

The **challenge** for many of those interviewed was that their volunteers were often older people – those with more time available to volunteer and equally those who are more vulnerable when it comes to Covid. In these cases, groups struggled to engage their volunteers and therefore to deliver their services. A case in point was Good Morning Ballymena, who lost around 10 volunteers from a starting pool of 36 or so, as many had technical issues connecting with online platforms etc and were unable to participate. In that case, the group also gained a few new volunteers, including someone who was housebound and was able to participate for the first time due to the changing nature of what was required.

Another example is the Girlguiding movement, which believes it has lost anywhere between 500–2,000 volunteers in the past year and will struggle to get many of those back again when things return to ‘normal’.

Other groups saw an **opportunity** and enlisted many new volunteers during the initial stages of the first lockdown, as people were eager to help out and do their bit for the emergency response. A swelling of civic engagement has been documented as an outcome from the pandemic^{viii}, but whether this translates into longer-term volunteering support here in Northern Ireland remains to be seen.

What was commonly agreed on, particularly during discussions at Network meetings, is the danger of ‘volunteer burnout’, especially in more rural areas, where groups tend to rely particularly heavily on volunteers and there are often fewer paid employees in VCSE organisations operating rurally. This concern is linked to worries around future funding and where this might come from, given the additional monies ploughed into the sector in 2020/’21 as part of the pandemic response.

At the second Network meeting on 9 February, this concern about burnout being imminent was strongly emphasised by many groups in their discussions and there was a call for Government to properly recognise the contribution made by volunteers throughout the pandemic and attempt to put an actual value on it.

6.4 Funding – Core vs Project

This theme came up again and again, in practically every conversation and discussion. It’s fundamental to the funding of the VCSE sector, whereby groups can (relatively) easily source and access project funding, but often find it incredibly difficult to get funding that simply “enables groups to just exist before they even start to deliver projects or services” as one grantee put it.

Concerns related to this were exacerbated during the period of this evaluation as some groups were struggling to spend the money they’d been allocated for projects which they’d been unable to carry out due to Covid. The same groups had lost many sources of income that would have covered core costs such as staff and premises, but were unable to use the funding they had to cover those costs in the absence of being able to run their project. They found some funders more flexible than others – the Community Foundation being

amongst the most flexible – and stressed the importance of this flexibility during a time when change was constant and inevitable.

Groups also highlighted an expectation that sourcing funding would become even more difficult over the next year or two as they feared the widespread emergency funding made available this year would impact on future pots available. The loss of fundraising hit many groups hard during this period and even when groups are able to fundraise again, there are concerns that many people will be facing reduced incomes and that poverty levels will increase, making it harder to raise funds that depend on the support of the general public.

A further point, reiterated time and again in relation to funding is the impossibility of finding funding that lasts beyond one year, making it difficult to plan strategically and offer any degree of security to those with jobs in the sector. This point was also acknowledged by DAERA and other funders in interviews.

When asked during the interviews if their group was facing a cliff-edge financially, most people were positive and upbeat, but it became clear when they expanded on their answer that many were being optimistic and that in fact, without the ability to reopen and fundraise, or an injection of core funding within the next 6–9 months, many would face financial difficulties at some stage in 2021.

This positive outlook is typical of those in the VCSE sector and probably necessary for them to be able to operate as they often do, in a challenging and volatile funding environment, while addressing some of the most difficult issues facing society in pursuit of their purpose.

6.5 The role of the VCSE sector

The relationship between the sector and government was explored in Network meetings and there was a definite feeling that the VCSE sector is under-valued and its importance inadequately recognised. Many groups felt that the vital role of the sector had really come to the fore during the pandemic and asserted that “Government would have been lost without the VCSE sector input and support and ability to flex and act quickly during this period”.

In the second Network meeting, we asked groups to discuss and agree on key messages for Government as it consulted on the outcomes for the new Programme for Government. There was a resoundingly clear message coming out around the need for government to “Value, respect and work in partnership with the VCSE sector” and equally a feeling that the relationship was too one-sided and unequal.

For those operating in organisations that support government in the delivery of essential services, particularly for example in relation to healthcare, it was felt that, although government relied heavily on the sector for service delivery, it failed to include it or consult with it when making decisions. There was also a suggestion that government should seek to build the VCSE sector into its supply chain and support organisations to deliver services which many do better and less expensively than their public sector counterparts.

6.6 Future challenges

The interviews and Network discussions amplified the survey findings regarding the biggest challenges facing groups and the wider VCSE sector in the future.

Core funding has been covered here, so it is included purely to reiterate what has already been said – financial stability beyond 2021 is a major concern and anecdotally, more of a concern than it was before Covid for many groups.

Re-engaging people safely and **‘dealing with Covid’** were major issues for many. Many of these groups exist primarily to support vulnerable individuals – such as older people, people with a disability, people with health conditions – the very groups that are most at risk from a global pandemic, so engaging them safely is a major concern for the groups involved.

For others, whose support is more community-focused, around families, children and young people and building capacity in more disadvantaged communities, the toll that Covid may exact on **mental health** and financial stability were key concerns, with many interviewees expressing worry about the longer-term impacts on individuals and communities alike. **Isolation and loneliness**, a growing problem before Covid can only be assumed to have increased since March 2020, as social contact has been severely restricted. Groups working in this space to support mental health and wellbeing expressed concerns about their ability to meet the increased demand without additional resources.

One interviewee expressed the view that the biggest toll would be on **young people** who inherit the legacy of the damage caused by Covid and who will ultimately “bear the

costs of repaying Covid”.

Others, including a number of funders and partner organisations were particularly concerned with a likely increase in **poverty** and at least two mentioned ‘Universal Basic Income’ as the key piece of social policy that they felt could make the biggest impact were it to be introduced, whilst another talked of the need for an anti-poverty strategy, as “so many of the issues being supported by the VCSE sector have their roots in poverty.”

During the interviews with partners, funders and the Community Foundation senior staff, one question was ‘Do you think Covid’s impact on the VCSE sector is temporary or transformative?’. Every single interviewee (10) said ‘transformative’, but most admitted they didn’t yet know how.

Community Foundation Chair, Maeve Monaghan, summed up the potential impact in her response, saying:

“There is likely to be a ripple of emergencies coming out of this. Unemployment, physical and mental health and more that we don’t even know about yet. We’re relying on a sector that’s burnt out and under-funded as it is.”

Another interviewee, from a major funding body, felt that the sector would need to adapt and change and that collaboration would have to be a bigger focus for future funding as there will be less money available. Yet another described it as having a “profound impact” on the sector’s future.

Encouragingly, the senior DfC representative interviewed pointed to a recognition that government couldn’t have put in place the interventions it did without the VCSE sector and

that efforts were being made to keep that “glow of gratitude” alive while discussions on the strategic relationship between the sector and government took place.

It was clear from this interview that some within DfC see the need for greater consultation and co-design with the VCSE sector and that a review of the relationship and co-dependence of the two partners is recognised as something that needs to be addressed.



7.0 Alignment with the Community Foundation's Strategic Aims

In undertaking this evaluation, we have kept in mind the Community Foundation's five strategic aims and to what degree the Covid-response aligned with and helped meet these aims:

- Inspiring generosity
- Building sustainable communities
- Community voice and innovation
- Thriving after the conflict
- People on the edges

The pandemic and the response to it across all sections of society was unprecedented and it largely brought out the best in people as they rallied to help those less fortunate. In the context of this evaluation, there is no doubt that the Community Foundation helped to stimulate and **inspire generosity** from many funders, leading to a pot of some



£5million to be distributed to help groups respond to local needs. Furthermore, the availability of this funding enabled local groups to go beyond their usual role and provide additional support within their communities – another form of generosity.

Whether the Covid-response funding enabled the **building of sustainable communities**, it is in many ways too early to call, as the impact of the pandemic on individuals, communities and the economy is still unfolding and will continue to for many months to come. What can be asserted from the interviews and discussions undertaken, is



that community spirit and action were boosted during the emergency phase of the response, thanks in large part, to the VCSE sector 'stepping up'.

The evaluation uncovered numerous examples of groups being creative and innovative as they adapted their role and services to meet changing needs and government restrictions. Some of these are showcased in the case studies in section 8.0 of this report. 'Voice' is something that's been raised during discussions at the Grantee Network meetings and the Core Group meetings which preceded them. Groups in the VCSE sector feel a lack of a 'coordinated voice' for the sector generally speaking. Hopes were expressed by a number of grantees that the Network would allow them to "use their voice to influence government decision-making on funding prioritisation". If the Community Foundation can achieve this as the Network develops, it will be significant and could provide a valuable conduit for consultation with government on key issues.



This theme in particular – **community voice and innovation** – is one which the Network has an opportunity to address and the Community Foundation may wish to consider making it a key objective.

Thriving after the conflict is a theme which is tackled by the Community Foundation through some very specialised, long-term projects and not one that the Covid-response set out or was in a position to, directly address. If anything, some of the lessons learned by the Community Foundation over time in tackling this strategic aim, may be useful in the coming years if the long-term impacts of the pandemic potentially become embedded in some communities or with certain groups in society.





The **'people on the edges'** aim is about those groups that are sometimes pushed to the fringes of society and get overlooked, such as LGBTQ+, refugees, asylum seekers etc. There were no survey respondents who identified LGBTQ+ as beneficiaries of their work, but one grantee who did

in their applications – The Rainbow Project. Only one survey respondent identified refugees and asylum seekers as beneficiaries, but when we open this up to include BAME individuals, 17 survey respondents claimed ethnic minorities to be among their beneficiaries. We interviewed representatives from three organisations meeting this description and their gratitude towards the Community Foundation for their support, flexibility and inclusiveness was clear.

These groups have wider struggles around digital poverty, language barriers and culture that need more concentrated support than was possible or feasible through the Covid-response, but the Community Foundation were at pains to ensure they were included and given a voice as part of this evaluation and every effort was made to do that.

8.0 Case Studies

Mind Your Mate and Yourself (MYMY) Ray Cunningham



Area served: Newry, Mourne & Down

Main beneficiaries: All sections of the community

Impact theme: Physical & mental health, wellbeing & safety

Funding received: £23,243

MYMY provides one-to-one counselling in the Newcastle area and has a social enterprise arm with a coffee shop and work hub at its base in Castlewellan. There are ambitious plans for the development of a new site at Ardnabannon that will offer a fully holistic approach to wellbeing.

MYMY lost about £40k as a result of fundraising that wasn't possible during Covid and would have had to shut its doors if a philanthropic supporter and the Community Foundation hadn't stepped in to help when they did.

With a small team of counsellors, some of whom had to shield, plus restrictions on the use of their premises, services had to move to online or phone and the team needed to train for that and to purchase new computers to facilitate the change in working. On the upside, they can now cater for clients living as far afield as Qatar.

MYMY has seen a dramatic increase in referrals and need for its services during Covid. Director Ray Cunningham says *"Anxious people have got worse during Covid, but that's as much because of the shut down in services as it is down to Covid itself. I anticipate the pressure on lifestyle-related health services increasing further as a result of the anxiety, fear and isolation in society."*

The team has had to reduce from 11 to 8 in the past year, but has plans to start growing again in 2021 to meet increased needs for its holistic wellbeing services.

Commedia of Errors Benjamin Gould



Area served: Province-wide

Main beneficiaries: General public and older people

Impact theme: Arts, Culture & Heritage

Funding received: £4,900

Commedia of Errors is a small theatre company that works to improve access to the arts for non-traditional audiences including older people with dementia. Pre-Covid, they toured to nursing homes with their Plays Aloud programme. Currently a registered charity, Commedia of Errors is restructuring to become a Co. Ltd by Guarantee.

Like many arts-based organisations, Commedia of Errors has found the pandemic particularly challenging. A small company of 2 self-employed freelancers, hiring other freelance staff to work on projects as required, all their usual sources of income stopped in March 2020 and they had to adapt their shows to digitised versions. This involved not only a different dynamic, but new skills, technical costs and more administrative time with less income and funding.

Although the change from in person to digital has undoubtedly lessened the impact of their live shows, they've been able to widen their reach, running the digital version, 'Plays Aloud at Home', more often and reaching more care homes in each iteration (36 vs 20).

Benjamin Gould says *"Coordinating with the care homes at this time was particularly challenging as they were under intense pressure, so everything took a lot longer than usual to set-up. Normally we charge a small fee, but at this time we offered our services for free, focussing on charitable homes to ensure our work reached those most in need."*

The future for organisations like Commedia is uncertain as the Arts may be one of the last sectors to reopen and not all organisations will survive 2021.

TAMHI Joe Donnelly



Area served: Belfast/
Newtownabbey

Main beneficiaries: Young people
aged 10-18

Impact theme: Lifeskills,
employability & enterprise and
Physical/mental health, wellbeing
& safety

Funding received: £9,600

TAMHI (Tackling Awareness of Mental Health Issues) was set up in 2011 as a £500 project and has grown to £250k, with a team of four. It offers peer-led training and works with schools and community groups to address mental health through sports and leadership programmes. Covid has meant a move away from mass engagement towards working with smaller groups.

TAMHI is a grassroots-focused organisation that is 80% grants-dependent. There are two strands of work – leadership programmes and sports projects mainly. Much of the focus is on getting young people away from online gaming and into physical activity, so when the pandemic forced everyone inside, it exacerbated the mental health issues for TAMHI's target groups.

They developed pop-up positivity packs for younger children and had them delivered by superheroes which created a buzz and helped engage the 16+ group in volunteering. Given that Covid forced many groups online and this was the exact opposite of what TAMHI was trying to do with young people, they had to get creative and adapt their offering and delivery.

Joe Donnelly says "Young people have really suffered through this time and it's been a challenge for us as we focus on getting them out and delivering mental health support through physical activity and games. We're still adjusting to the new environment and it's great that funders have been so flexible during this period. I worry about the legacy for young people though – they'll be repaying the cost of Covid for years – financially and emotionally."

Linking in with other groups for delivery will be key to TAMHI's delivery in the coming months.

Me, You and Them Glena McDowell-Khan



Area served: Dungannon

Main beneficiaries: all ages and
groups in the community

Impact theme: Physical &
mental health, wellbeing &
safety

Funding received: £14,977

Me, You and Them was set up in January 2020 and was just getting started when the pandemic hit. It was started to fill a gap in provision for mental health support and befriending in the Dungannon area, but quickly got involved in the local Covid-response and a wider range of activities than originally planned.

Me, You and Them was just starting to find its feet when Covid hit and the group quickly took on a local coordination role, gathering 80 volunteers to distribute food parcels, meals and more to those most at risk.

Although unplanned, a Foodbank was set up thanks to donations from local retailers and others. This looks set to continue as it's likely the need for it will grow with more job losses expected in the months to come. A 'Back to our Roots' project – helping people grow and cook their own food, and a particular focus on supporting the multi-cultural population in Dungannon were developed, along with securing IT equipment to help children with schooling and much more.

Glena McDowell says "In some ways, the pandemic helped put us on the map by giving us a chance to show what we could do when faced with a crisis. We've grown much faster than planned and our vision has changed. There's a lot more we can do to help the people of Dungannon and I plan to keep on that track post-Covid."

Like many groups, securing Core funding is the priority for Me, You and Them in the coming year.

Good Morning Ballymena Debbie Chestnutt



Area served: Ballymena and surrounding

Main beneficiaries: Older residents

Impact theme: Reduction of isolation & disadvantage

Funding received: £10,000

Good Morning Ballymena is one of a number of telephone check-in services for older people in the Mid and East Antrim Council area. Pre-Covid, the group would have held some meetings and events as well as calling around 250 people a week to check-in and help combat loneliness and isolation.

Good Morning Ballymena provides a free telephone service for older residents who may feel lonely or just appreciate a regular call. The majority of beneficiaries are 80+ and when the pandemic hit, the service was more important than ever as this age group were almost all shielding.

Food deliveries were being covered by other local groups, so Good Morning Ballymena used their funding to create 'Happy Bags' for the people who used their services. These included emergency kit for the hospital and luxury items and when the time came, they bought birthday presents and had doorstep deliveries arranged to ensure the safety of beneficiaries.

Debbie Chestnutt says *"It was challenging for us when we had to close the office and we lost a number of volunteers, as some were unable to connect online and others had to shield and weren't able to help out. Those that did get involved in the doorstep deliveries really enjoyed being able to meet the person they'd been speaking to on the phone on their usual daily calls."*

The volunteers now feel better connected with the people using their service and may retain the idea of monthly visits when things open up again.

Nigerian Community NI (NICONI)

Michael Abiona



Area served: Greater Belfast

Main beneficiaries: Black and minority ethnic (BAME) families and individuals

Impact theme: Lifeskills, employability & enterprise and Reduction of isolation & disadvantage

Funding received: £15,000

NICONI offers practical, culturally appropriate support to members of the BAME community, including Asylum seekers and refugees. This can range from education and employability support to social and emotional welfare and recreation and includes families and individuals across Greater Belfast and beyond.

NICONI has been helping the BAME community, many of whom are on the fringes of society as refugees and Asylum Seekers since 2017. When Covid hit, a number of its beneficiaries who were employed, lost their jobs, leaving families and individuals without income and struggling to cope.

The group used funding to provide culturally appropriate food parcels and tablets to help children with online learning. Around 80 families were supported and online activities were organised to help keep people engaged and ensure they didn't withdraw further from society at this difficult time.

Michael Abiona says *"Many of our members have language and communication difficulties, so we had a vital role to play in engaging with and supporting them in terms of food, toiletries and other items they needed when shielding. Many cannot work and most don't have transport, so our support was critical. IT literacy was a challenge, so we have lost contact with some people. Core funding for a group like ours is vital to help us provide the support we do to the BAME community who often have nowhere else to go for help."*

Committed volunteers keep NICONI going, but more support is needed for the BAME community.

9.0 Conclusions

9.1 The VCSE sector spearheaded the response to Covid

- There is strong support for the community response that was, by all accounts spearheaded by the VCSE sector when Covid hit in March 2020.
- The VCSE sector itself believes strongly that it was critical in getting support out quickly to where it was needed and government acknowledges the vital role the sector played in the response, but perhaps has not done so publicly yet.

9.2 The Community Foundation's fast and flexible funding response was critical

- There is a recognition amongst many in the sector and in government that the Community Foundation was among the most flexible and fast-acting of funding bodies at that time and that its ability to act quickly was critical to the emergency response. Indeed, government would have struggled to get money out quickly to groups in need without the support and expertise the Foundation brought to the table.
- The pandemic response beautifully illustrated the Community Foundation's ability to "connect people who care, to causes that matter", inspiring generosity from a wide range of public and private sector funders and philanthropists. A full list of all funders who donated to the Covid-response funding covered in this report is available as Appendix 5.

- VCSE groups greatly appreciated and needed the flexible, trusting approach taken by funders such as the Community Foundation at this time and were grateful to be able to access funding more easily and quickly during the emergency response.

9.3 Some lessons can be learned re: duplication and a more measured approach

- It is fair to say that certain elements of the response, such as food parcels, were not always well-coordinated, nor necessarily responsive to actual needs on the ground and that where this was handled best, it was often as a result of a local community organisation taking on a lead coordinating role to ensure support was directed to where it was needed most.
- A great deal of additional money was made available to the sector in a short period of time and some groups are struggling to spend this within the timeframe. Perhaps a more measured, staged approach to releasing funding would be preferable to ensure longer-term support is available when new needs arise, as they seem likely to do for some time.
- There is some duplication of funding currently, where independent funders such as the Community Foundation, the National Lottery Community Fund and Halifax Foundation have themes that overlap with each other and potentially with government funding. Might a more collaborative effort between funders enable a more targeted, focused approach and ensure funding can be spread more fairly?

9.4 Where collaboration occurred, there's a need to harness positive momentum

- Funders made more effort to communicate and collaborate as part of the emergency response than they had previously and all found this extremely beneficial. How can these new relationships be maintained and developed?
- DfC pulled together an Emergency Leadership Group to inform and coordinate the pandemic response and found it to be dynamic and productive forum – bringing together people from across government, the VCSE sector and statutory bodies with different skills, perspectives and experience but a common purpose. How can this be harnessed and built-on outside of the emergency context so that it becomes the way 'business as usual' is done?

9.5 The relationship between government and the VCSE sector needs reframing

- There is a clear and critical need for consultation and engagement on the relationship between government and the VCSE sector. NICVA's Manifesto for Change should get the discussion started, but there is a small window of opportunity to harness the current recognition of the value the sector by government and to address this issue quickly and fully.

9.6 The sector needs help to build resilience and capacity and become sustainable

- A critical need is for government and other funders to consider both core funding and funding that goes beyond one year to enable organisations to plan

effectively without the threat of closure. This would also help identify those organisations most willing and able to collaborate and be innovative in their approach and therefore most likely to be sustainable and impactful in the longer term.

- VCSE organisations claim a willingness to collaborate, but will need support to move away from competing and towards partnership and to understand the necessity for this in a more –constrained funding environment. This will involve culture change within parts of the sector which will be difficult and organisations like the Community Foundation and NICVA will be central to facilitating that change.

9.7 The Foundation's Grantee Network can help give the sector a valuable voice

- There has been a strong appetite for the Grantee Network proposed by the Community Foundation, with 160+ organisations currently signed up and eager to share, learn and collaborate together. It will be important to invest in this Network to maintain the momentum and build it into a forum that can be seen as a strong, representative voice for the sector.
- The Network can also play a critical role in helping the Community Foundation stay abreast of needs and adapt to changes in societal needs in the coming months and years.

10.0 Recommendations

A great deal of positive action took place during the Covid-response, with more flexible, adaptable and responsive funding, service-delivery and partnership working than pre-pandemic in many areas. It is vital that this is harnessed to ensure a positive legacy from Covid and demonstrate learning and growth as a result of the experience.

The following recommendations are made in response to the evidence gathered as part of this evaluation and in the context of the Community Foundation's five strategic priorities:

- Inspiring generosity
- Building sustainable communities
- Community voice and innovation
- Thriving after the conflict
- People on the edges

Addressing these recommendations will not provide a full panacea, but will go some way towards ensuring that the Foundation's investment in this work has agency and makes a positive difference within the VCSE sector and wider society.

10.1 Build on the Community Foundation's commitment to be agile and flexible

1. The Community Foundation should maintain its annual LEAN review of grant-making processes to ensure continuous streamlining and efficiency of approach, which were strong factors in its being able to respond with more agility than any other funder during this period.

It should also explore options to extend this approach across other areas of its operations so it becomes more widely embedded in the culture and ethos of the organisation, directing all future decision-making.

2. The Community Foundation was one of 50 signatories to a pledge for more open and trusting grant-making in February 2021. The campaign, run by the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR), involves eight commitments designed to make funders more responsive, flexible and risk acceptant. The Community Foundation should use its influence to promote the campaign and engage more funders to embrace these principles in an effort to make sourcing funding easier for groups doing good work.
3. Internally, the Foundation should work with its donors and funders to encourage more trust and risk-taking in the culture of giving. Consideration of multi-year funding should be strongly encouraged, as this is a barrier to growth and sustainability for many VCSE organisations. To mitigate against the dependency this can create, the Community Foundation could develop a programme aimed at supporting organisations with the development of more sustainable funding and income models and make this a condition of receiving larger, multi-year grants. The Foundation's newly developed Philanthropy Network could be a perfect test-ground for shifting the culture around giving in these ways.
4. In line with its commitment to be more open and trusting, it is recommended that the Community Foundation review its constitution – in particular, the restrictions around funding groups with a religious purpose, to examine whether the historical reasons for this decision remain valid.

10.2 Develop new relationships between funders

5. Relationships between independent funding bodies changed significantly and positively during the Covid-response. A much more open, collaborative dialogue was opened between funders such as the Community Foundation, the National Lottery Community Fund, Halifax Foundation and others and all parties to this dialogue reported benefits and a desire to build on this during our interviews. The momentum gained should be channelled through the existing NI Funders Forum to enable a structured approach to co-working and grant-making and to reduce the potential for duplication and gaps in funding support across Northern Ireland. Conversations around collective working by funders have already taken place through this Forum – the imperative is to ensure they materialise into solid action.

10.3 Create a new narrative between government and the VCSE sector

6. Some within senior roles at DfC (the gateway government department for the VCSE sector), recognise an urgent need for change in the relationship between government and the sector and are keen to harness the 'glow of gratitude' that currently exists to create a positive legacy. The Community Foundation could use the establishment of its Grantee Network and the findings of this report to contribute to that discussion, in partnership with NICVA. This needs to happen quickly on the back of NICVA's Manifesto for Change consultations, which set out its stall as the organisation best placed to lead on changing the narrative.

10.4 Undertake ongoing monitoring and respond to societal needs

7. As many participants to this evaluation have pointed out, we are still in a state of flux and will be 'dealing with Covid' for some months and possibly years to come. To that end, the needs identified in this report may have a limited shelf-life and some degree of ongoing monitoring of the situation would be not only helpful, but potentially critical to the formulation of future policy and funding decisions. The Community Foundation has an opportunity through its grant monitoring forms to keep this under review to some degree, but needs to establish a mechanism for both considering the feedback and channelling it into decision-making.
8. Beyond that monitoring, the Grantee Network provides a valuable forum for engaging groups in further surveys or targeted discussions to gather feedback and it is important the Community Foundation does all it can to make the Network productive and valuable for all involved. The Network will give a valuable and valued voice to the VCSE sector if developed and nurtured in the right way – it needs time and effort invested in order for that to happen.
9. The systemic issues in society referred to in 3.1 and acknowledged throughout this report have been further exacerbated by the pandemic and this needs to be carefully examined on a cross-sectoral basis by government, the VCSE sector and funders. The ELG set up by DfC to coordinate the Covid-response should continue, but with this new remit as its purpose going forward. Harnessing the momentum generated by the ELG and making renewal and recovery of the VCSE sector and wider society the focus would help ensure we don't return to the broken 'status quo' we had pre-Covid.

10.5 Encourage and support collaboration in the VCSE sector

10. Funders have pointed out the need for greater collaboration and sharing of resources and skills between groups and VCSE organisations have themselves claimed a desire to collaborate more. That said, when it comes to a choice between collaborating for a smaller share of the funding pot or competing for a larger share, many opt to compete. In future, as funding sources become even more competitive, collaboration is likely to become more of a condition of funding, so groups will need to adapt. The Covid-response has shown that adaptation when there's a necessity to do so, is highly achievable and indeed, helps build resilience. Providing support and training to groups to help them identify opportunities for partnership working is something the Network should make a priority.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Outcomes Statements

These statements were developed from the Evaluation Framework which appears on Page 13 of this report and link to the Data Collection Plan (Appendix 2).

Stakeholders

Funded groups

1. **Continuity** in the organisation's ability to provide existing services and fulfil its mission under emergency circumstances
2. **Change** in the services provided to meet new local needs as they transpired
3. Development of new **skills** and **knowledge** required to respond to community needs
4. Increased **resilience** and **capacity** of the group – attracting new volunteers etc

Beneficiaries

1. Maintained/improved physical and mental **health, wellbeing and safety**
2. Maintained/strengthened community **cohesion and social capacity**
3. Maintained/improved **lifeskills, education, employability and enterprise**
4. Reduced or prevented growth in **isolation and disadvantage** through access to services
5. Maintained/improved access to connect with the **arts, culture or heritage**

VCSE

1. **Sharing & collaboration** between organisations in the VCSE sector
2. **Capacity** within the VCSE sector to meet the identified needs
3. **Skills & knowledge** within the sector as learning from the pandemic and response filters through
4. **Continuity of services** through COVID-19 due to funding support

The Community Foundation (CFNI)

1. Contribution of the programme to **strategic priorities** – in particular:
 - a. Inspiring generosity – from funders and within communities
 - b. Building sustainable communities
 - c. community voice
 - d. thriving after the conflict
 - e. people on the edges
2. Learning and **lessons** to inform **future policy** and strategy
3. Changes to **relationships** with funders and/or government as a result of the response

Funders

1. Contribution to the funder's **strategic priorities**
2. **Social benefit** achieved through the funding
3. **Changes in approach** to or **understanding** of the needs of the sector

NB: unintended outcomes discovered during the evaluation process may be captured and included in the model at a later stage of the process

Appendix 2 – Data Collection Plan

Stakeholder	Targeted outcome	Evaluation question(s)	Data source(s)	Collection method(s)
Funded groups	Continuity of existing services	<p>To what extent have you been able to continue normal service delivery since March?</p> <p>How big a role did the funding from the Community Foundation play in enabling that continuation of services?</p>	Grantees – main contacts	<p>Main grantee survey</p> <p>Telephone interviews</p> <p>Online focus groups or discussions at network meetings</p>
	Change in services to meet new needs	<p>To what extent have you had to adapt your service delivery due to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The restrictions placed on public mobility/gatherings? • The availability of staff & volunteers to carry them out? • The changing needs of people within your community? <p>In what ways did the needs within your community change? (provide list of options).</p> <p>Tell us about the changes you tried to respond to and how these were identified (open question).</p> <p>Are you aware of other organisations in your area who responded in similar ways to you, particularly in relation to providing food for 'vulnerable' residents?</p>		
	Development of new skills and knowledge	If you had to adapt your service delivery, to what extent did you already have the skills and knowledge needed for the new approach?		

Stakeholder	Targeted outcome	Evaluation question(s)	Data source(s)	Collection method(s)
		Did you have to develop new skills and/or knowledge to deliver the new services? If yes, in which areas? (provide list of options, e.g., ICT for online delivery)		
	Increased resilience and capacity	<p>To what degree would you consider the learning and experience gained during your Covid-response has helped increase your organisation's resilience? How?</p> <p>To what degree would you consider the learning and experience gained during your Covid-response has helped boost your organisation's capacity? How?</p>		
Beneficiaries	Maintained/improved physical and mental health, wellbeing & safety	[organisation's name] received funding from the Community Foundation to address the following theme [name theme], as a beneficiary of their services between March and November (?), to what degree would you say their support helped you personally to....	Beneficiaries of the various grantees	short survey distributed by the funded groups to their beneficiaries OR group calls with
	Maintained/strengthened community cohesion & social capacity			
	Maintained/improved lifeskills, education, employability & enterprise	To what degree would you say their support benefitted the wider community during this time?		

Stakeholder	Targeted outcome	Evaluation question(s)	Data source(s)	Collection method(s)
	Reduced or prevented growth in isolation and disadvantage through access to services			beneficiaries to explore
	Maintained/improved access to connect with the arts, culture or heritage			
VCSE Sector	Sharing & collaboration between organisations in the VCSE sector	<p>Targeted discussion at a network meeting to explore these questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you feel organisations in the sector collaborated effectively to make a combined response to needs in their communities? Did organisations share resources, learning and skills where possible? Were you aware of duplication of efforts or resources by organisations responding to the need in their communities? Examples? Do you feel the VCSE sector had sufficient capacity to meet the needs in local communities? To what degree was that capacity dependent on funding such as that received from the Community Foundation? 	Grantees – main contacts	Targeted discussions at Network meetings
	Capacity within the VCSE sector to meet identified needs			
	Skills & knowledge within the sector as learning from the pandemic and response filters through			
	Continuity of services through COVID-19 due to funding support			

Stakeholder	Targeted outcome	Evaluation question(s)	Data source(s)	Collection method(s)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you feel the VCSE sector gained additional skills and knowledge as a result of their pandemic response that will benefit the sector's longer-term resilience and capacity? To what degree was the funding support from the Community Foundation needed to enable organisations to continue delivering their services? 		
The Community Foundation	Contribution of the programme to strategic priorities : a) inspiring generosity b) building sustainable communities c) community voice d) thriving after the conflict e) people on the edges	In what ways has your response to Covid through the three main Covid-response funds contributed to the achievement of your five strategic priorities? In what ways may it have diverted the focus from these strategic priorities? How do you know - where is the evidence?	Senior Team at the Community Foundation - Orla, Andrew etc	Structured interviews
	Learning and lessons to inform future policy and strategy	How did you find the application process and response times in comparison with other funds to which you've applied? How appropriate were the themes under which the funding was classified?	Grantees responses re: process	Main grantee survey

Stakeholder	Targeted outcome	Evaluation question(s)	Data source(s)	Collection method(s)
	Changes to relationships with funders and/or government as a result of the response	On a scale of 1-5, how much would you say your relationships with the following funders have changed since they engaged in the Covid-response grants? (list funders) where 1= deteriorated significantly, 3 = no change and 5 = improved significantly. Where there has been a significant change, please explain why you think this has happened.	Senior Team at the Community Foundation - Orla, Andrew etc	Structured interviews
Funders	Contribution to the funder's strategic priorities	How did your funding contribute to your existing strategic priorities?	Key contacts within some/all funding organisations	Structured interviews/ survey - depending on numbers of funders
	Social benefit achieved through the funding	To what degree do you believe that your intended social benefits were achieved through the distribution of this funding?		
	Changes in approach to or understanding of the needs of the sector	To what degree has your understanding of the needs of the sector changed during this period and how might this affect your future approach to funding?		

Appendix 3 – Survey Questionnaire

CFNI's Covid-response grant making

Background

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey to help CFNI evaluate the impact of its Covid-response grant making. Your feedback is invaluable in informing how we can improve our approach to supporting the third sector. It will also help us to understand the issues that communities across NI have faced since the pandemic arrived in March 2020.

Because there's a lot to cover, we would ask you to allow 20 mins to fully complete the survey. Please do try to answer all questions and provide comments where possible. The more we hear from you, the better we can respond.

Please focus your responses only on the four Covid-response grants referred to within the survey.

Finally, as a thank you for your time and input, *all responding organisations who provide their name at the end of the survey will be entered into a prize draw to win a £500 donation from CFNI. Each organisation will be entered only once. The winner will be drawn on 5 January and notified that week.*

1. What type of organisation are you?

- ☐ Charity registered in NI
- ☐ Charity registered elsewhere in the UK
- ☐ Charity awaiting registration
- ☐ Company Limited by Guarantee
- ☐ Community/Voluntary Trust
- ☐ Community organisation
- ☐ Social Enterprise
- ☐ Community Interest Company

Other (please specify)

2. How many full and part-time employees and volunteers does your organisation have in Northern Ireland?

	FT staff	PT staff	Volunteers
0	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
1-5	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6-10	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11-20	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
21-50	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
51-99	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
100+	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Comments

3. Briefly describe your organisation's **primary** beneficiaries. Eg, children and young people, older people, ethnic minorities, women, disabled people, local families etc.

4. Which of the following Council areas do you serve? (please tick all that apply)

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> All - we're province-wide | <input type="checkbox"/> Derry City & Strabane |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Antrim & Newtownabbey | <input type="checkbox"/> Fermanagh & Omagh |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ards & North Down | <input type="checkbox"/> Lisburn & Castlereagh |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon | <input type="checkbox"/> Mid and East Antrim |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Belfast | <input type="checkbox"/> Mid Ulster |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Causeway Coast & Glens | <input type="checkbox"/> Newry, Mourne & Down |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Comments | |

CFNI's Covid-response grant making

The application process

Evaluation of the Covid grant-making response of the Community Foundation in Northern Ireland

5. To which funds did you apply and approximately how much of your requested funding was approved?

	Our application was unsuccessful	Less than 50%	50-74%	75-90%	91-100%
The Coronavirus Community Fund	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Older People's Fund (previously Turkington Fund)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Comic Relief: No Child Goes Hungry Fund	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
New Needs Fund	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Not sure which fund(s)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

6. How would you rate the grant application process?

Very difficult	Quite difficult	Neither difficult nor simple	Quite simple	Very simple
★	★	★	★	★

Please comment on the reason for your rating

7. How would you rate the speed of CFNI's decision-making and response to your application(s)?

Very slow	Quite slow	Neither slow nor fast	Quite fast	Very fast
★	★	★	★	★

Please comment on the reason for your rating

8. If there is any aspect of CFNI's approach or response since March that you believe could have been improved or any feedback you'd like to provide, please tell us here.

CFNI's Covid-response grant making

Your group's Covid journey

9. To what extent has your organisation had to **stop** delivering its usual services during Covid? (*only consider where you've had to stop some services completely, not just change how they're delivered*)

- ☐ Not at all
 ☐ 51- 75%
 ☐ Up to 25%
 ☐ 76-100%
 ☐ 26- 50%

10. How important was the funding from CFNI in enabling you to **continue** delivering your services?

- ☐ Not at all important
 ☐ Very important
 ☐ Not so important
 ☐ Extremely important
 ☐ Somewhat important

Comments

11. In which of the following ways have the needs in your community changed since March? (tick all that apply)

- ☐ More **isolation** and **loneliness** as people can't meet up due to shielding/restrictions
☐ Older/more vulnerable people can't get **access to services** due to shielding/restrictions
☐ More households in **financial difficulties** due to job losses
☐ **Food poverty** increased
☐ **Mental health** issues exacerbated by lockdown/restrictions
☐ **Physical health** problems due to lockdown/restrictions
☐ Increased **domestic violence** increased due to lockdown/restrictions
☐ Access to **employment** or **skills** training hampered

Other/Comments

12. As a result of Covid, to what extent have you had to change or adapt your service delivery due to the following factors?

	Hardly at all	Just a little	A moderate amount	Quite a lot	A great deal
The restrictions placed on public mobility/gatherings?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The availability of staff & volunteers to carry them out?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The changing needs of people within your community?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Your organisation's financial resources	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The ability of beneficiaries to take part	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Comments

Evaluation of the Covid grant-making response of the Community Foundation in Northern Ireland

13. If you've had to adapt your service delivery due to some of the factors outlined above, did you have the skills and knowledge within the organisation to do so?

- ☐ Yes, we had all the skills we needed in-house
- ☐ No, we had to develop new skills in some areas

Other/Comments

14. What were some of the challenges you faced in adapting your service delivery? (tick all that apply)

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Communicating effectively with beneficiaries via Zoom etc | <input type="checkbox"/> Finding enough funding to deliver what was needed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Staff struggling to juggle home and work life while working remotely | <input type="checkbox"/> Engaging additional volunteers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Not having the technology infrastructure for staff to work from home | <input type="checkbox"/> Practical challenges linked to social distancing restrictions |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Underestimating the need and demand for our service | <input type="checkbox"/> ICT skills for online delivery |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Delivering our services with staff furloughed | |

Other/comments - please share as much as you can

15. How much do you think the learning and experience gained during your Covid-response has helped build your organisation's resilience and/or capacity?

0 - Not at all 5 - A moderate amount 10 - A great deal

16. In what ways has your organisation's resilience and/or capacity improved? (tick all that apply)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> We are more skilled at working remotely | <input type="checkbox"/> We have diversified our service offering |
| <input type="checkbox"/> We have saved money due to reduced overheads | <input type="checkbox"/> We have found creative ways to be more efficient |
| <input type="checkbox"/> We have broadened our skills and knowledge | <input type="checkbox"/> We are now better connected to our communities |
| <input type="checkbox"/> We have found new income and funding streams | <input type="checkbox"/> N/A - I don't think it has improved |
| <input type="checkbox"/> We have pulled together better as a team and are more effective | |

Other/comments

17. CFNI's Covid-response funding was themed under these **5 Impact areas**:

- 1) Health, wellbeing and safety
- 2) Community cohesion & social capacity
- 3) Life skills, education, employability & enterprise
- 4) Isolation and disadvantage
- 5) Access to connect with the arts, culture or heritage

Do you believe these themes cover all the needs you witnessed in your area?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Partly
- ☐ No

CFNI's Covid-response grant making

18. What additional themes or issues do you believe need to be considered?

CFNI's Covid-response grant making

Your beneficiaries

Evaluation of the Covid grant-making response of the Community Foundation in Northern Ireland

19. Which of the following **Impact Themes** was the focus of your funding from CFNI?

	The Coronavirus Community Fund	Comic Relief: No Child Goes Hungry	The Older People's Fund (previously Turkington Fund)	New Needs Fund	Not sure which fund(s)
Advance people's physical and mental health, wellbeing and safety	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Promote reduction of isolation and disadvantage and access to local services	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Connect people with the arts, culture and heritage	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Improve life skills, education, employability and enterprise	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Maximise ability to strengthen community cohesion and build social capacity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

20. Thinking about the **individuals** who benefitted from your services, to what degree do you feel you achieved the impact selected above?

- ☐ Not at all
 ☐ A lot
 ☐ A little
 ☐ A great deal
 ☐ A moderate amount

Comments

21. Have you carried out your own evaluation of the impact of your services on beneficiaries since April 2020?

- ☐ Yes
 ☐ No

CFNI's Covid-response grant making

22. Would you be willing/able to share the (anonymised) results of your evaluation to help us better understand how your beneficiaries have been impacted by your work to support them during Covid?

- ☐ Yes
 ☐ No

Comments

23. If you answered 'yes', please provide contact details so we can follow up

Name

Organisation

Email Address

Phone Number

CFNI's Covid-response grant making

The Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) Sector

24. How much would you say that VCSE organisations in your area **collaborated** effectively to respond to community needs? This might have included sharing skills, resources or learning or joining forces to have a bigger combined impact.

0 = Not at all 5 = A moderate amount 10 = A great deal

25. Can you offer examples to support your answer above?

26. How much would you say there was **duplication** of efforts by organisations in your area? This might have included food parcels from different sources going to the same people for example.

0 = Not at all 5 = A moderate amount 10 = A great deal

27. Can you offer examples to support your answer above?

28. Thinking about the whole VCSE sector in Northern Ireland, how much do you agree it had **sufficient capacity and resources** to meet the needs of local communities between March and November 2020?

- ☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Agree
- ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree

29. How important was the additional funding made available to the sector during this period to its ability to meet community needs?

- ☐ Not at all important ☐ Very important
- ☐ Not so important ☐ Extremely important
- ☐ Somewhat important

Comments

CFNI's Covid-response grant making

Looking to the Future

30. Looking ahead, what do you see as your organisation's top three challenges for 2021? (please list 1 to 3 where 1 is the biggest challenge)

1	<input type="text"/>
2	<input type="text"/>
3	<input type="text"/>

31. Thinking ahead to 2021, how secure do you think your organisation's future looks at this present time?

- ☐ Not secure at all - we're facing imminent closure
- ☐ Not very secure
- ☐ It could go either way
- ☐ Reasonably secure
- ☐ Very secure

Please comment on your response

32. Finally, if you would like to be invited to a follow-up interview where we can drill down into more detail on your answers, please leave your details below.

Name

Organisation

Email Address

33. Organisation Name (needed only if you wish to be included in the prize draw for £500 and haven't provided your details in Q.32)

Appendix 4 –List of Interviewees

Grantees

Pauline Buller	Aghalee Village Hall
Ian Morton and Ian Getty	Back in the Game Ballymena
Stephanie Mitchell	Belfast Friendship Club
Jaclyn Harron	Circle of Support
Benjamin Gould	Commedia of Errors
Lekan Ojo-Okiji Abasi	Counselling All Nations Services (CANS)
Karen Healy	Creggan Country Park
Michael Skuce	Derrygonnelly & District Community Partnership
Dan McEvoy	Downpatrick Community Collective
Ciaran Rooney	Fermanagh Rural Community Initiative
Samuel Courtney	Four Orange Thursday Club
Claire Flowers	Girlguiding Ulster
Debbie Chestnutt	Good Morning Ballymena
Eithne Burke	Gornaghey Community Association
Claire Patience	Laurencetown, Lenaderg & Tullylish Community Association (LLTCA)
Eamonn McCarron	Liberty Consortium
Glena McDowell-Khan	Me and You and Them
Nichola Simpson	Mid-Ulster Women's Aid
Raymond Cunningham	Mind Your Mate and Yourself
Michael Abiona	Nigerian Community NI (NICONI)
Alan McDowell	Portadown Wellness Centre
Joseph Donnelly	Tackling Awareness of Mental Health Issues
Nigel Pell-Ilderton	The Vineyard Compassion

Funders and Partners

Gerard Treacy	Dept. for Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs
Moirá Doherty	Department for Communities
Brenda McMullan	Halifax
Alison Fraser	National Lottery Community Fund
Una McKernan	NICVA
Kate Clifford	Rural Community Network
Valerie Ingram	Ulster Garden Villages

Community Foundation NI

Orla Black	Grants Director
Andrew McCracken	Chief Executive
Maeve Monaghan	Chair

Appendix 5 – Sources of Covid-Response Funding

Listed alphabetically

ARN Foundation
Bank of Ireland
Bank of Ireland (ROI)
Barclays (UK Community Foundation)
Bladon Masonic Lodge
Citibank
Comic Relief
Community Foundation Ireland
Sir Denis Desmond
Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Department for Communities
Derry City and Strabane District Council
General Donations
National Emergencies Trust (NET)/UK Community Foundation
Older People's Fund
SONI
The Honourable the Irish Society
Ulster Garden Villages Ltd
Voluntary Services Belfast (VSB)

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Thanks also go to the 20 organisations who supported the design of the Network by taking part in the 'Core Group' referred to in the report.

On behalf of the Community Foundation, thanks are also extended to all those funders and donors who made it possible for the Foundation to support communities at this time by providing the funding for them to distribute. Without the trust and generosity of such donors, the Covid-response covered in this report would not have been possible.

Likewise, sincere thanks to all those community organisations and charities that stepped up to the mark when Covid hit and did everything they could to serve their communities. Those groups are a shining example of the care and strength the VCSE sector demonstrated at a time of crisis and the Community Foundation is delighted to have been able to support them in their efforts.

Notes and References

- i. [NICVA's Manifesto for Change - Unlocking the Full Potential of Voluntary and Community Action in NI | NICVA](#)
- ii. <https://www.nicva.org/stateofthesector>
- iii. [Poverty | Department for Communities \(communities-ni.gov.uk\)](#)
- iv. [Labour market in the regions of the UK - Office for National Statistics](#)
- v. <https://communityfoundationni.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Vital-Signs-Northern-Ireland-2017.pdf>
- vi. [Health Survey Northern Ireland: First results 2019/20 \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](#)
- vii. [Applying for a Grant from a fund - Community Foundation Northern Ireland \(communityfoundationni.org\)](#)
- viii. <https://inews.co.uk/news/uk/covid-more-united-than-divided-study-891836>

