

Sharing power with intermediary funders

*Case studies from Comic Relief's
Shift the Power programme*

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These case studies have been written by Sonakshi Anand, Charlotte Pace, Katie Turner and Miranda Lewis, based on interviews and desk research carried out by the authors.

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Introduction

Shift the Power is an intermediary funding programme run by Comic Relief. It aims to shift the power in grant-making to communities and get more funding to small grassroots organisations¹ and communities across the UK, and to trial a trust-based and 'relational' approach to devolved grant-making.

Comic Relief partnered with four intermediary funders; [Community Foundation for Northern Ireland \(CFNI\)](#), [Corra Foundation](#) in Scotland, [Wales Council for Voluntary Action \(WCVA\)](#), and [Groundwork UK](#) in England, who acted as the intermediaries between Comic Relief and local communities. The intermediary funders' role was not only to administer grants to organisations and groups at a community level, but also to identify ways in which communities could have greater control over determining where and how these grants were spent.

Launched in September 2019, the majority of the programme took place during the coronavirus pandemic. This has meant that, whilst our focus has been on adaptations made to funders' practices as a result of their participation in the programme, we acknowledge that adaptations may have been partially influenced or accelerated in response to the impact of the pandemic in communities.

This paper consolidates the case studies of the four intermediary funders, reflecting on what they have learnt through their participation in the *Shift the Power* programme.

This paper is part of a series of outputs produced from the programme, which includes a [briefing paper](#) and [blog](#) on 'lived experience', a [blog](#) on how funders can help communities deal with the pandemic, and a [report](#) on the learning from the first phase of the programme.

¹ Grassroots organisations in the context of the *Shift the Power* programme were organisations with annual incomes below £250,000

Community Foundation Northern Ireland

Community Foundation Northern Ireland (CFNI), an independent grant-making trust, focuses on giving voice to people and communities and enabling them to see themselves as building blocks for change. CFNI has 40 years' history of working within communities in Northern Ireland and experience of being an intermediary funder, connecting funders to local frontline community organisations. It manages over 65 different funds. They have worked with a variety of programmes and funders including the European Peace Programme, private donors, and the National Lottery Community Fund. Their extensive grassroots experience and connecting role, combined with Comic Relief's commitment to risk taking and common thematic focus, felt like a good fit for the [Shift the Power](#) programme.

CFNI had previously worked with Comic Relief for five years through the UK Community Foundation intermediary body. This had been a positive experience, and CFNI were keen to continue the relationship. They were also attracted by the programme's commitment to enabling communities to shape programmes, and to including people with lived experience. From the Comic Relief perspective, they wanted to 'spend where the need is' and work with an intermediary funder who could help them understand the priorities within the pre-determined social change themes.



Covid-19 has helped us really reshape our systems and processes for the better and they've become more accessible, which has really contributed to shifting the power to communities.

How CFNI approached grant-making

CFNI has given grants to initiatives linked to the four Comic Relief themes – [Gender Justice](#), [Children Survive and Thrive](#), [Global Mental Health Matters](#), and [A Safe Place to Be](#) – but adapting them to the context of Northern Ireland. For example, under the Safe Place to Be theme CFNI identified three marginalised communities – refugees, LGBTQ+ and Irish Travellers – and looked to fund work around building sustainable communities.² During Covid, spaces that had been safe were no longer safe or available, particularly as LGBTQ+ groups, clubs, bars or venues were closed, and many felt that home was also no longer safe. CFNI, therefore, funded other safe spaces for them, for example in social media – ‘Listening to the groups and their lived experience, that forced us to be broader than we started out to be’.

CFNI took a **three-pronged approach** to the Comic Relief funding as they moved to respond to Covid 19:

Part 1

Funding from the Department for Culture Media and Sport’s (DCMS) Big Night In was added to their local community-based responses emergency programme. This included their New Needs fund, which was very much about providing flexible support to enable organisations to reopen safely and tackle new needs identified as a result of Covid, for example the rise in isolation and poor mental health, and support for the BAME community. The fund was designed by the Foundation staff as a result of conversations with local communities around how they could tackle the new needs they were facing.

Part 2

Community Support Programme (Open Call): CFNI took time to design a new community support programme for which they used funding from both the existing core Comic Relief (Intermediary) fund, and DCMS Big Night In. The programme encompassed new emerging themes alongside the existing Comic Relief themes, including:

- Racism
- Domestic violence
- Children’s return to school
- Food poverty
- Safe spaces for LGBTQ+ communities
- Impact of Covid-19 on refugees and asylum seekers
- Mental Health

² One of [CFNI’s strategic objectives](#) is building sustainable communities. By this, they mean ‘*working towards a stronger, resilient and sustainable community sector equipped to face the challenges of tomorrow by unlocking resources and skills, piloting innovative approaches, developing partnerships and encouraging entrepreneurial mindsets*’.

Part 3

Community Support Programme (Targeted Call): CFNI provided some targeted and focused strategic support, based on a funder plus model. This included support for organisations working with certain groups additionally impacted by Covid-19 (the list above in Part 2) to identify a project, to apply and submit the application for support, and to identify learning and evaluate the impact of their work. The process was facilitated by CFNI staff and an externally appointed facilitator/evaluator.

CFNI structured their Covid response by initially giving emergency support for those most in need and funding projects with three to four months' delivery time. They then moved into a recovery phase, which was about supporting organisations to adapt and to pay for some necessary capital expenses – for example, safely opening up community centres, acquiring laptops and getting digital access.

CFNI's approach to shifting the power

CFNI reflected that they had a relatively narrow view to begin with about what lived experience and shifting the power meant for them. They came to understand that, rather than being too hung up about whose lived experience needed to be brought in, the focus needed to be on making funding more accessible by shaping better systems and processes. This included learning from communities what's important for them and which issues need to be addressed. Over time, they have taken a more open and organic approach.

Shift the power is adapting our processes so that they are accessible, simple, using clear language in the application process and that we are not being too bureaucratic in terms of what we ask. We are being more trusting, flexible, and more risk-taking as funders to get the money to organisations doing good work. With of course, due diligence, safeguarding and gate keeping processes in place. Funders cannot say they are shifting the power without being flexible and risk taking in their grant making.

Having the processes already in place

CFNI had undertaken an annual organisational lean review and updated their digital practice shortly before the Covid-19 pandemic meaning they did not have to generate new processes: 'we knew we could do this, we were ready'. This included:

- **Avoiding requesting information already held on grantees:** e.g. not asking for additional supporting documentation that they may have already had on file, or that they could access in other ways such as through the Charity Commission website.
- **Streamlining application form questions:** to a more focused set of questions that would help them to make decisions.
- **Enabling decisions to be made much quicker:** by moving panels online and changing the way they were facilitated.

- **Using DocuSign to make offers of awards:** which led to a significant reduction in paperwork, and to successful grantees signing letters of offer and receiving payments within days, rather than weeks.

Lived experience on decision-making grants panels

Each funding panel included people with lived experience who were asked to review the draft assessments made by the CFNI team and to question the decisions made based on their own experience.

Some pointed out information that maybe for our CFNI team did not seem relevant, but they, with the lived experience, would see value in the project in some applications, and in others they commented that a particular methodology would make the situation worse than it currently was. It really helped in the decision making.

When other funders have approached CFNI about their approach to shifting the power, they have been explicit in explaining that beneficiaries have to have the ability to set the agenda, and that there should be no overburdensome audit: *'this has helped us showcase ourselves in terms of our ability to spend money with independence and flexibility and helped ensure that the government money goes to the right places, quickly'*.

Shifting to a high trust model

Having total trust in the way an investment is made meant listening, challenging, and reflecting on the difference made and the needs to be met, rather than just focusing on financial capability. This included creating a safe space for stories to be told, comfortably and in an honest way, with the support of an external facilitator/evaluator. It was important to involve the grantees in the decision to allow foundation staff to attend and participate in these safe spaces for learning and reflection, to be seen as partner and fellow traveller on the community development journey rather than the more normal relationship of funder/grantee. The external facilitators/evaluators reported back to CFNI that the grantees welcomed the participation of CFNI staff in this process. They felt that the Foundation was committed to learning from their experiences and to using what they learnt to improve grant funding processes.

The nature of the relationship with CFNI was important to grantees, who felt that CFNI understands their organisations and believes in them:

Trust is key – we feel privileged, CFNI has been a godsend to our organisation, asking 'How can we help, what do you need?'

They are a lifeline, relational and my go to. They plug gaps and they see what is available, and what we do. They trust that you are doing what they say you are going to do.

Grantees felt that CFNI were *'living'* and *'modelling'* an approach to shifting the power that they (grantees/communities) were then able to question, interrogate and learn from.

Communities becoming the first responders to the situation

CFNI have developed a Grantee Network to build on the momentum that they have seen: *'As funders, we must support and recognise this shift in power, right down to the local community level which we probably never would have recognised could shift so quickly'*. Through this programme, CFNI has connected with groups that they have never worked with before, for example Irish Travellers. They are exploring ways to invite these groups into future CFNI conversations. *'It is not only about inviting them to sit on committees, but also about the talents they have and how best we as CFNI can help to harness those to support local people and communities'*.

Adapting processes and language

'Shifting the power is about adapting our processes so that they are accessible, simple, using clear language in the application process. We are being more trusting, flexible, and taking more risks as funders, to get the money to organisations doing good work. With of course, due diligence, safeguarding and gate keeping processes in place. Funders cannot say they are shifting the power without being flexible and taking more risks in their grant making'. CFNI recognises the importance of looking at their own processes and reviewing who is being included and excluded by them.

Support with core costs

Organisations need funds to help with adaptations to their buildings, safe service delivery, and core costs. CFNI has awarded a certain amount for capital expenditure and core costs as well as programme costs. *'We have tried to be as flexible as we can be, given that we are a relatively high risk-taking organisation'*.

Grantees described feeling that they are *'invested in'* and greatly appreciate the opportunity to include core costs in the funding: *'CFNI allows project management costs – so my wages. I bring in other people – keep the 4 of us going and employed'*.

Keeping reporting burden on grantees to a minimum

CFNI saw it as their role as an intermediary funder to report to Comic Relief on how the money was being spent instead of grantees being expected to do this. Grantees appreciated the straightforward and proportionate reporting: *'It's a few simple questions that covers a lot and it allows us to focus on what we do rather than the funding process and reporting is also proportionate'*. *'CFNI is the easiest funder I have ever dealt with in terms of application – they let you know what happens next. No hassle. No barriers. I am from the community in which I live and teach – I don't have big words'*.

CFNI feels it is important when asking for impact stories from grantees to understand the best way for them to be told without the funder being too prescriptive. They also want to make sure that people know what use will be made of the data. *'We all have written evaluation, monitoring reports and have never used them again which makes it a very extractive process. Our aim through this process is to ensure grantees feel a part of this, they shape the stories that feed our and Comic Relief's work'*. There is a need to make grantees feel comfortable in sharing and feeling involved in the process.

Bringing grantees' voices into story-telling processes

CFNI held a series of '*seeing is believing*' visits where grantees met each other virtually, as it is '*important for groups of grantees to come together and share their stories, it has a peer learning/ support angle to it as well*'. CFNI believes that every community has a story to tell, no matter what the grant value is and '*sometimes communities don't recognise the story and these visits help them recognise and talk about the difference they are making*'.

Another way in which CFNI is ensuring the grantee's voice is heard is through a process called Story Mountain. They had a series of workshops with grantees on a few themes and a workshop focused on how they collect stories from the grassroots communities whom they support and how they tell the collective story.

Brokering a relationship with Comic Relief and other organisations

Grantees were all aware that the funding came from Comic Relief. Some reflected that this felt important as without the intermediary arrangement they would not have felt confident applying directly to Comic Relief, but now feel like they have a more direct relationship which has opened up future possibilities:

CFNI brought Comic Relief to us.

We are aware [the funding] is from Comic Relief but it's nice to have it coming from a local funder. Comic Relief would not have been aware of us and before they seemed a little daunting. It has opened things up.

Grantees also appreciated meeting other organisations as part of the grant-making process and the in-depth discussions that came about. '*[We have enjoyed] learning with other grantees and connecting with others*'.

Learning for future grant-making practice

CFNI felt that changes they have made to their grant-making practices as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic are already having a lasting impact on their approach to shifting the power:

Covid-19 has helped us really reshape our systems and processes for the better and they've become more accessible, which has really contributed to shifting the power to communities.

CFNI is also continuing to make changes to their practice to better support communities to respond to local needs. This includes setting up the [New Needs](#) fund which focuses on the long-term recovery of communities and the new Empowering Change Programme.

Many of the grants CFNI is now making available are larger grants, compared to the relatively small amounts that were available for emergency funding, in recognition of

the scale and complexity of the issues to be tackled: *'mental health, isolation, domestic abuse'*.

CFNI sees a focus on funding core costs, and providing unrestricted funding, as one aspect of helping community groups to thrive; this is in recognition that some groups are struggling to deliver activity-based projects without core costs to support them, or struggling to fit projects and plans within funding restrictions set by funders. They are also thinking about how to remove barriers for unconstituted groups. Much of the local community action and activity is done by people who come together and groups that are not constituted, but who know the local need. *'They have come together because they have a heart and empathy and may not have ambition to be constituted and how do we actually support them as being the drivers of community change and shifting the power?'*

Corra Foundation

Corra Foundation (Corra) is a national charity with over 30 years' experience in distributing funds to local communities. They were previously the Lloyds-TSB Foundation for Scotland, with the mission of supporting people in communities. Through their experience of grant-making with grassroots communities, they are now skilled in identifying those communities most in need and providing grants to support their needs. They have been the intermediary funders for the Scottish Government, distributing their grants to grassroots community organisations. With this track record, Corra came to this role with Comic Relief, with significant experience of being an intermediary funder.

Corra's ambition as a Comic Relief intermediary funder was to encourage people to make meaningful change in their own community. They saw the *Shift the Power* programme as an opportunity to adapt their grant-making processes and criteria and to test out new models around place-based approaches:

We were keen to embody and represent the charitable mission and thematic priorities of Comic Relief, recognising that the funding we were distributing is funding that has been raised by funding appeals made by individuals. We always had that in our minds as we approached the design of the process.

Corra recognised it as an opportunity to enable Comic Relief to increase their reach into local contexts: 'to me, this intermediary funding has a more collegial appeal'.



This programme is having a knock-on effect at Corra foundation and the way in which we do things. Been great to experiment with new ideas and priorities for communities.

How Corra approached grant-making

Corra delivered a Scotland-wide general fund for charities and community groups, as well as community-led grant-making in specific locations. Prior to Covid-19 in March 2020, they had a couple of grant-making panels to make grants.

They made significant adaptations to their funding processes and approach grant-making as a result of Covid, including:

Saying yes more often

Corra noticed a shift in their role as they moved towards a mindset of agreeing grants more frequently and trusting the communities more to know what would work best for them. *'We've just been saying yes an awful lot, knowing that the communities know better'*.

Listening and responding to emerging needs

This helped groups to have the confidence to come to Corra and talk about their priorities. It meant that Corra was able to reach out to new groups too. Almost 40% of grantees were new to Corra:

Communities were able to make significant changes in their communities ... They were assertive in discussing how they would use the funding.

Staying accessible

Just *being there* for the grantees and making time to listen to them made a difference. Corra aimed to get a balance between openness, efficiency and having the right checks and balances in place:

We managed the volume [of applications] by cutting back on process where we could and doing the necessary to ensure we were able to reach out as widely as we can.

Keeping the focus on shifting the power

Corra was anxious not to lose this focus as they shifted to emergency grant-making, and they were particularly aware of the needs of very small organisations:

We worried for the community-based organisations, so decided to design a sensitive process in distributing these grants, ensuring that it was easier, simpler and did not duplicate work for these organisations.

Swifter grant-making

They started using a rolling application process to speed up grant-making:

We adapted to the environment. Even though the funding and its purpose was the same, the environment we were operating in was very different. It was beneficial for community organisations to get their decision quickly so they could plan better.

Corra's approach to shifting the power

Straightforward and transparent process

The application process was simple, quick and involved minimal bureaucracy. The processes developed were simple and accessible to ensure a greater reach. Corra staff were available by email and phone to answer any questions on the application process and provide any support needed:

It's the best process we've been part of.

We received really good, clear and informative emails. Even the reminder ones were not threatening.

It is delightful to have a funder whose application and monitoring process is easy and straightforward.

Community grant-making

Corra decided that one way to build on established relationships and bring in the voices of the community in a more involved way was to explore community grant-making. Two separate approaches were developed:

1. Theme-based community grant-making
2. Place-based community grant-making

Theme-based community grant-making

Corra was looking for a partner organisation that would bring in lived experience and make decisions themselves based on realities on the ground. Youth Borders, a consortium of youth groups across the Borders, led this work and were key to making this work happen. They brought together a representation of 12 young people from different youth groups to be a part of a panel that met online every week to design the grant and the process including the application forms and decision-making processes. They decided to focus upon mental health and young people as this felt most relevant to them.

The young people were directly involved in decision-making and in becoming grant makers themselves. They gave out £18,000 of funding to various organisations, including the youth groups that were part of the consortium, working with young people around the theme of mental health. *'The young people really took on the task of making community grants based on the priorities emerging on the ground, which really shifted the power to them'*.

Corra did pick out a few applications that were not eligible for legal reasons but the group of young people on the panel made decisions on the quality, fit and focus of the work. Corra was also involved in the paperwork and sending out the letters, *'but all the decision-making was absolutely made by them and the feedback was that they found the process very interesting and enjoyed the decision-making for grants that would support mental health and young people'*.

Place-based community grant-making

At the time of this report there were two place-based grants programmes in place that Corra had initiated. The first one was in Carbrain, in Cumbernauld, a community where Corra already has a strong presence through a community co-ordinator based there with Corra's place team. The community co-ordinator and a Corra grant adviser met with around 30 local people to discuss the opportunity and how they would approach it. They decided on a steering group of eight people who met to agree final criteria, design the application and make decisions. Seventeen applications were received and twelve were successful. The most common reason for declining an application was a lack of explicit focus on the local area. This was a criterion the group was especially pleased to be able to apply as, for various reasons, their community has often felt overlooked by other opportunities. In recognition of the grassroots nature of many of the Carbrain applicant organisations, and since Covid-19 prevented face-to-face training, Corra produced a PowerPoint/video on safeguarding to ensure that groups were well-informed and able to meet their obligations. It is hoped this will support them in applying for future grant funding from other sources. The presentation will also be used with other place-based grant-making rounds going forward.

The second place-based grants programme was in Aberdeenshire where they worked with the council's Learning and Development team. To start with they did not have an existing community group to work with and realised without that *'it is very hard to just go into a community and get a framework going to make grants'*. The fund, however, allowed for them to bring people together and discuss how the money should be spent, what priorities to focus on and how to run the community grants. *'People found the process very impactful, with many reflecting that it brought the community together and involved people who would previously not be involved'*.

Community-led grant-making is *'very much a new departure for Corra Foundation'*, which makes it difficult for them to assess the extent to which it has been successful; early indications, however, are that *'overall it has worked really well'*. The groups feel that they have been listened to and the grant-making has responded well to the needs of the communities that are sometimes overlooked:

People who work here understand the policies and their implications better. They also know what is needed and how to deliver it. So the whole approach by Corra has been about empowering communities.

This programme is having a knock-on effect at Corra foundation and the way in which we do things. Been great to experiment with new ideas and priorities for communities.

Strategic grant-making

Corra also made two 'strategic grants' to organisations, i.e. to organisations that support and fund grassroots organisations.

The first was to Aberlour Child Care Trust. Corra identified their fit with the shifting the power theme as they do *'micro distribution of funding, well under £1000, in the vast majority of cases for absolute essential needs like clothes, mattresses, electricity cards, fridge etc., often to people that have found themselves in an unexpected crisis situation'*.

The second was to the Scottish Refugee Council. They didn't have an existing funding route in place *'but they had already set the wheels in motion to establish an application process for community organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers to apply for small amounts of money'*.

These strategic grants did not involve an invitation for application; instead Corra had a conversation with each organisation to understand how they would make grants and who they would reach: *'These two organisations would not have received grants for those amounts from our normal intermediary funding relationship'*.

Shifting how they approach lived experience in grant-making panels

The Scotland-wide fund for small grassroots organisations entailed two rounds of funding. For the first round, Corra engaged people with lived experience by having them take part in grants decision-making panels. They had about six individuals with lived experience involved in a day-long decision panel, reviewing pre-assessed applications. On reflection, it was felt that the agency of the individuals with the local knowledge was weakened due to the assessments made previously.

Corra felt that during the second round they were able to engage people with lived experience more deeply: *'[the first time around] was good, but I didn't feel like it built lived experience into the process in a meaningful way'*. For the second round, they brought in community organisations who were their grantees from round one as assessors and decision makers:

This we felt would not only help bring in knowledge of the local community and their needs, tapping into their lived experience, it would also be beneficial for them to know how grants are made and what we look for in applications, which would build capacity. When we did call for applications, we went back to almost all the organisations we had funded previously and they were keen to be a part of this process.

The approach has been well received by those involved in the panels:

The experience in a way was uplifting. When I offered my ideas and thoughts they were welcomed by others. It was a deeply gratifying process. Deciding what needs to happen and to fund an organisation or not [...] was scary yet fun.

Capacity building

Corra's aim to build the capacity of their grantees was significantly impacted by Covid. They changed their strategy in the second phase and built better and stronger relationships by inviting all round one grantees to be panellists in the second round.

The organisations concerned have also gained knowledge and experience of grant-making practices and processes through their involvement:

They get to learn about different styles, framing a case for support and they have been grateful for the opportunity to know the kinds of questions we raise when we make grants.

We built capacity in a different way as the grantees were able to read applications, see how different organisations are approaching addressing local needs, putting these in words and understand what the Foundation was looking for in the proposals.

Building a sense of trust and personal connection

Large national funders can feel both out of reach and out of touch; working with Corra meant grantees felt that their work was understood:

These funders know us and know the work we do and the community we work in, which immediately took away a lot of the stress of applying to prove ourselves.

This was more personal, rather than being bureaucratic and disconnected. It's like when you buy from a small family business who can explain and are connected with you much better than buying online. There is trust here which feels legit.

Learning for future funding practice

Corra feels that the adaptations they have made to their grant-making practices as an intermediary funder for Comic Relief will have a positive influence on the way they work in the future: *'We really did change our process of assessment and decision making, which doesn't happen very often in our other funds. This was influenced by the pandemic, but it became a much stronger programme'*.

The elements of their practice that Corra hopes to sustain or build on are:

Continuing to involve grantees in grant decision-making

There has been an important shift of power to communities who understand their own priorities and needs better than grant makers. It also builds capacity among the grantees.

'Not only are they organisations embedded in the community, they can also identify further organisations within their communities that might benefit from funding in the future to ensure a greater spread in shifting the power over the long run. Keen to continue to reach out to hyper-local organisations that could benefit from the funding whom we haven't yet reached'.

Looking at what lived experience means to Corra

The programme has had a significant impact on the development of the '*discussions around lived experience, which were pretty much non-existent at the start of the programme*'. Corra has now set up a lived experience development group and there are ongoing internal discussions about what lived experience means on different programmes. They are also working to influence government and other funders about the importance of, and practice in, working with lived experience.

Continuing to explore community grant-making

The Diversity and Equity fund is taking a community-led grant-making approach learning from this work and is supporting grassroots organisations working around diversity and inclusion.

Exploring how to develop more accessible and equitable application processes

For example, encouraging applications from, and making the process accessible to, organisations for whom English may not be the first language. '*If we're making grants only on the basis of written applications, we are not being fair to organisations coming from a different place, working on some key community priorities*'.

Thinking about the role of the funding

Specifically, thinking about the role of multi-year funding in an intermediary funding relationship and how it can be a vehicle to shift the power more to communities and grassroots organisations.

There were also some suggestions made by grantees about adaptations they would like to see to grant-making practices:

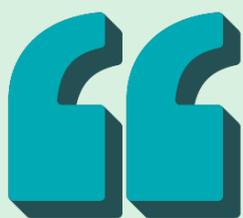
- **Less restrictive funding criteria:** '*It did feel a bit restrictive as we could only provide for children up to the age of five. What happens when a family has two children one aged five and one aged seven? It's not a huge deal, but it does create a level of bureaucracy*'.
- **Clarity on what is needed to evidence expenditure.**
- **More focus on core rather than project costs.** '*Funders need to think about sustainability as well. They need to think of core costs. I'm not sure if this was Corra's policy or Comic Relief's or the system, but funders in general need to think about longer term sustainability*'.

Groundwork UK

Groundwork UK is a federation of charities working locally and nationally to mobilise practical community action on poverty and the environment. They help people to gain confidence and skills, get into training and work, protect and improve green spaces, lead more active lives and overcome significant challenges such as poverty, isolation, low skills and poor health. Groundwork UK supports local communities through a combination of administering and distributing grant funding, delivering local projects, and providing specialist support including community enablers.

Groundwork UK has been the intermediary grant funder for Comic Relief on the [Shift the Power](#) programme for England, supporting organisations with a turnover of less than £250,000. Groundwork UK provided support locally through its community enabler network in the following ways: helping grassroots community groups develop project ideas; advising on the grant application process; providing one-to-one grantee support as necessary; convening grants panels; and organising events and workshops designed to address common themes and support needs for groups in specific areas.

Groundwork UK works as an intermediary funder for other partners such as Tesco, High Speed Two (HS2) and the European Social Fund (ESF). They were interested in working with Comic Relief on this programme as it combined grant-giving and community support with testing approaches to capacity building through grant-making. They were also attracted by the flexibility in approach that being a Comic Relief intermediary funder affords, as it allows a culture of testing and learning as the work evolves. They felt that Comic Relief trusted them to have the necessary knowledge and expertise in grant-making to run the programme: *‘Comic Relief have very much been the partner that trusted us to design the programme as we felt best’*.



We have tried to stick to the principle that as long as there are similar beneficiaries and similar outcomes and they are responding to new needs, it's best to trust them to do the right thing.

How Groundwork UK approached grant-making

Groundwork UK provided a mixture of capacity-building grants (up to £1000) and project delivery grants (up to £4000). They made use of their network of grassroots organisations to publicise the programme and develop the participatory grant-making approach. Their role and approach shifted substantially in March 2020 after the Covid-19 pandemic hit the UK:

Changing funding needs and priorities

Groundwork UK opened up applications for further capacity building, recognising that organisations would be weakened by the impact of Covid. Many of these grants went to support organisations as they shifted their work online: *'this funding was focussed on helping groups to get support for developing themselves internally, which sometimes gets missed out by funders.*

Moving grant systems online

The charity shifted their decision-making panels online, which was initially a challenge, but the enablers and panellists were supportive of the change.

Checking in on small organisations

They also undertook a [survey](#) of community groups on their mailing list and discovered two thirds were forced to either significantly scale back their services or close. This information helped them to consider what support was needed.

Aiming for flexibility and trust

Groundwork UK tried to be flexible and supportive, and to operate on a basis of trust and transparency with grantees: *'it is important to trust organisations and see that they know the best way to carry on their service delivery for their users. We have tried to stick to the belief that as long as there are similar principles and outcomes and they are responding to new needs, it is best to trust them to do the right thing'.* Groundwork UK felt that they were helped with this by Comic Relief's own flexibility: *'Comic Relief have been very approachable, very willing to go with our ideas and what we feedback from the groups, and were largely flexible, which supported us in our approach towards grantees'.*

Selected funding themes that reflected changing or growing needs

For example, the charity closed the Mental Health Matters theme early given the overwhelming response of applications towards this theme and to make sure other themes, e.g. A Safe Place to Be and Gender Justice, were also given priority.

Groundwork UK's approach to shifting the power

Local regional panels

Holding local panels was the key mechanism used by Groundwork UK to shift the power. They set up panels made up of a combination of staff from Groundwork UK and individuals with lived experience of the issues covered by the four funding themes – [Gender Justice](#), [Children Survive and Thrive](#), [Global Mental Health Matters](#), and [A Safe Place to Be](#). Sixty-six panel meetings were held across nine English regions to make decisions on how the funding should be distributed.

The grants were publicised locally by local Groundwork UK trusts, which encouraged more grassroots organisations to apply for funding. The panels were held across the various English regions. They also used Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs) to divide the geographies, giving some structure to the grant-making processes. Each panel was organised and chaired by local enablers. They helped to bring in panel members from the local area with lived experience on the various themes. There was flexibility in the way in which regions were divided as it was not clear at the outset how many applications would come from each region; for example, in the first round there were only two applications from London. With additional publicity, applications from this region were boosted in the following rounds.

The role of the panels was to review applications for funding. The initial process was that, prior to applications being reviewed by the panel, there had already been an initial shortlisting process conducted by Groundwork UK, with grants officers highlighting the ones they were recommending to the panels for approval, rejection or deferral. However, *'the feedback we got from our panel members was that they didn't really like that they felt they were being told what decisions to make and they felt that it was undermining their experience. Learning from this feedback, we changed our way of working with the panels. This way the panel felt more confident in their grant making process and we learned to trust them and their decisions more'*:

Ensuring our grant officers or enablers were not making decisions with local people with lived experience and local knowledge making the best decisions for their communities.

With Covid-19, Groundwork UK moved their panels online – this was coordinated by the local enablers. Meetings were held on either Microsoft Teams or Zoom. Papers were circulated to panel members a week in advance of the meeting along with a briefing document and a map showing where the projects were located. Having read the papers in advance, the panel then discussed each application before deciding whether or not to fund, based on how well the application met the criteria of the programme. For panels where there were more applications than could be funded, panel members were asked to score the applications in advance.

They also asked the panel members to judge the merit of the larger outputs and outcomes of the applications, and trust the groups and the grants officers to work with the groups to ensure best delivery to achieve the outcomes, especially given the uncertainty of what Covid-19 restrictions would allow to be delivered: *'Giving assurance to the panel members and they knowing that we trust the groups will make the best decisions about delivery,*

helped. We could have discussed forever about how to deliver under different scenarios and this approach worked well’.

Panel members were very committed to the process despite the amount of work involved. Representation on the panel was voluntary, although any expenses were paid. There were five panels in total in each area, held every quarter with between eight and 15 applications to consider at each panel.

Groundwork UK saw the panels as a two-way exchange of knowledge and experience: *‘in a way we helped to build their [panel members from grassroots organisations] capacity to know about grant making and they made the right decisions for their local communities and areas, drawing from their wealth of knowledge, expertise and work in the various themes across the years’.*

Panel member comment:

I really enjoyed taking part in these, it was interesting to gain an insight into where the funding goes, the types of projects being launched and to also be able to use my own knowledge and experience to help make the decisions. The process was fair and well thought through and I would be happy to take part again.

As part of the additional funding Groundwork UK received from Comic Relief and the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) from the Big Night In, Groundwork UK also delivered eight-weekly online panel meetings, which helped towards allocating funding to groups in need of support from the impact of Covid-19. Groundwork UK chaired and delivered the meetings using the experience they had gained from moving the project delivery grant panel meetings online and inviting a pool of panel members who had taken part in the project delivery grant panel meetings as well as Groundwork UK’s Youth Advisory Board members.

Capacity-building grants

Groundwork UK started by giving £500 to groups for activities to help strengthen their organisation:

This is the first time we have ever done a grant like this. We had got feedback that grassroot organisations are keen on this and we had a chance to trial it. We have always made project delivery grants and this was our way of developing sustainability and robustness, shifting the power in a small way to help groups develop better policies and procedures, improve their websites, online communications, volunteer management, trustee training and recruitment.

However, they were still getting applications for project-focused grants, so they led publicity on what they meant by ‘capacity building’ and their enablers spoke to some groups. The feedback made them realise that £500 was too small and this amount was changed to £1,000. *‘Since then, we have had a strong take up of this’.*

One grantee talked about their appreciation of funding for capacity building being made available to them, feeling that this type of funding is typically provided for larger organisations:

It's very hard to get something that will help improve your overall project and how you deliver and how you work. Even though it wasn't a massive amount of funding or massive amount of time it did make a difference.

Another grantee that had received a capacity-building grant commented on the difference it made to their organisation:

The grant has allowed us to directly address our staff capacity issue and improve the delivery of our projects. Now, due to our charitable status, we have access to funds that are for charities only and we can increase our core team of staff. This has strengthened our organisation significantly by ensuring that we are able to continue to deliver our large programme of work to the highest standard and adapt to the challenges the pandemic continues to create as well as identifying new communities to support, increasing our reach.

As part of Groundwork UK's capacity-building support, they deliver a series of online workshops covering topics such as fundraising, volunteer management, websites and social media management, as well as online networking workshops where funded organisations can chat to others in their area to share experiences and learning. These are complemented by workshops from specialist organisations covering governance, safeguarding and impact measurement.

Speed of response and flexibility

Grantees particularly appreciated the speed of communication with Groundwork UK and the straightforward application process. Although grantees did not feel they had a deep relationship with Groundwork UK, they felt that they were trusted by them when things needed to change as a result of Covid: *'there were no quibbles or qualms about it. They were incredibly understanding. They trusted us to decide when to resume which was refreshing'*.

Knowing that, due to Covid-19 restrictions, grantees were unable to deliver their projects in the way that they originally intended when they applied, Groundwork UK was very flexible, allowing grantees the opportunity to deliver their projects in a different way, e.g. online or in smaller groups, or allowing extensions so they could deliver their projects once restrictions were lifted.

It is important to trust organisations and that they know the best way to carry on their service delivery for their users. We have tried to stick to the principle that as long as there are similar beneficiaries and similar outcomes and they are responding to new needs, it's best to trust them to do the right thing.

For relatively small sums of money the reporting requirements felt a bit disproportionate to some grantees: *'it was a good amount of work for a really small pot of funding. Had it been more money it would have felt more worth the effort'*.

Learning for future funding practice

Groundwork UK felt that through their local reach into networks of grassroots organisations, they had been successful in acting as an intermediary to help fund local initiatives in England. This included helping Comic Relief funding to reach organisations in the forefront of the response to the immediate and emerging needs of some of the most vulnerable groups when the Covid-19 pandemic hit.

Groundwork UK is keen to develop community funding panels, and participatory grant-making. It is consulting with panellists, enablers and previous grantees about how they found the process and to see what can be improved. Moving forwards, a community panel network will be developed to build on the learning from the Comic Relief programme and further engage people with lived experience of their local area in the wider work of Groundwork UK.

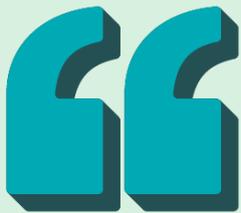
They would like to understand more about the beneficial aspects of participating in the panels, both for the participants and the impact of the grants: *'knowing that the panels together had so much experience in the sector, we are sure that the best decisions have been made for the grants as the power of the local panels is in that local knowledge'*.

Following suggestions from grantees who reflected that the effort of applying will be more worth it for a bit more money and to do something more substantial in the community, they are considering whether to increase their grant amounts. This would mean a smaller cohort of grantees for Groundwork UK to interact with and support learning in an organised way. They are also keen to develop the capacity-building aspect of the fund, as part of the project delivery grants, enabling local community groups to develop their robustness in order to continue to deliver local services.

Wales Council for Voluntary Action

Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) is a national membership body for the voluntary and community sector in Wales. WCVA's approach as a Comic Relief intermediary funder was to work in partnership with the 19 County Voluntary Councils (CVCs) across Wales. Each county in Wales has a CVC and their role is to provide advice and information to local voluntary and community groups on volunteering, funding sources and a wide range of other issues. WCVA awarded a small number of strategic organisational growth grants. Regional leads (eight CVCs) awarded small grants and all CVCs provided support and advice to potential applicants.

WCVA felt that Comic Relief's *Shift the Power* programme was a 'perfect fit' for their own and CVCs' ambitions to ensure more funding reaches grassroots groups in Wales. They also felt that having the Comic Relief name attached would help to increase the visibility of the work of the third sector in Wales:



As the national body for the third sector WCVA have good reach, reputation, and access to the network of CVCs so it's a no brainer. Together we are appreciative of what community groups in Wales need. Most small grass roots organisations were not likely otherwise to have been funded by Comic Relief.

How WCVA approached grant-making

The fund offered two strands of the same grant within one single round of funding:

- Grants for organisational growth, focusing on strategic impact and increasing resilience: £30,000–£60,000
- Small grants of between £1000 and £10,000 for activity

Overall, WCVA and the CVCs felt that the partnership worked very well. CVCs worked closely with grantees to adapt delivery when the Covid-19 pandemic started and WCVA really valued the fact that the CVCs understood the on the ground realities.

WCVA adapted their funding approaches in response to the pandemic in the following ways:

Reduced information required at the application stage, and then following up directly with phone calls.

Created a longer lead-in window for applications, so there was time to work with potential grantees on successful applications. Following this, grants were spent over 18 months.

Used DocuSign rather than needing signed hard copies of grant paperwork.

Focused on understanding very local, often simple and basic needs that make a big difference. For example, they funded one organisation to arrange for chiropractors to make home visits to support those at risk of falls.

Shifted to a more trust-based approach: *'Assessment and scores have been used but if they are not quite hitting the mark it hasn't mattered'*.

Opened up applications to unconstituted groups.

WCVA's approach to shifting the power

WCVA set up regional panels representing local communities, lived experience and professional expertise. This built on existing CVC experience of using panels in this way. There was an open call for applications to the panel at the start, and membership was regularly refreshed to get the balance right and avoid 'serial committee-goers'. CVCs additionally have their own trustees with a broad range of viewpoints; bringing all this together meant that *'people were able to make better, more informed decisions, and there was a distinct lack of buzz words'*.

WCVA felt that as a result of the panels, different decisions were made because it was not a national body making them. The panel approach has been very successful in focusing funding on local priorities, and genuinely engaging people with lived experience: *'it was 100% plainly clear to see that small grants with a community panel could be more reflective of the community and that we were getting funding to those that need it. More use of lived experience has also been really positive, and panel meetings have gone ahead locally which has worked well too. Accessibility for people with lived experience has worked very well'*.

Grantees reflected on their experience as part of the programme:

- **The relationship with Comic Relief felt clear and was seen to be a significant bonus:** *'[the funding] was very clearly from Comic Relief, the branding was everywhere. We even put a red nose on the building'*.

- **Grants were appreciated for their flexibility and particularly for the personal relationship at the CVCs:** ‘they helped us get everything together, there was a long list and seemed complicated but with their help and support we got there – it was a totally different experience to any other funder’.
- **Grantees felt that their capacity to engage with other funders was developed through the programme:** ‘it was all about the personal touch, accessibility and approachability and it helped me to understand and learn about how to apply to other funders too’. This also opened up possibilities for future relationships: ‘I would not have thought of applying for Comic Relief had it not been so locally focused, it would not have occurred to me’.
- **The relationship felt trusting:** ‘the message was we trust you to do the right thing’.
- **Shifting the power felt part of the programme:** ‘this project is run by the community it is grown through community members and the structure will lead to community decision making being embodied into it’.

Learning for future funding practice

WCVA saw this programme as an opportunity to do things differently – the focus was on getting the money out to where it is most needed. Unlike most large grant schemes this was not prescriptive.

WCVA reflected that there were a number of factors that helped to make the programme a success:

- Being able to see what is needed at a large scale
- Being consistent in approach
- Having good data collection to be able to see what is happening and where
- Having a good idea of genuine needs
- Understanding the different demographics across counties
- Giving CVCs a free hand – for example, interpretation of the strategic themes of Comic Relief and how they translate into hyper-local Welsh community activity
- Flexibility on all sides, particularly relating to grantee changes of plan
- Open discussions within the intermediary funding group; this helped to work through issues

Looking ahead, they have identified some ideas and opportunities that they would like to take into their future grant-making:

Developing a mentorship scheme for groups that are currently missing support. This would be an opportunity to support them and build them up.

Keeping the power shifted. Looking at how to keep that power within local communities, including how to harness the goodwill of volunteers as the focus shifts from emergency to recovery.

Making brave decisions. Careful judgement is needed to understand where local schemes are working and where they are not. Some of the grants are for organisations that may be failing anyway, and when discussing adaptations, a call must be made based on the viability of organisations at a very local level.

Continuing to look at adaptations to the application process for other grants, *'It's about being less prescriptive; Comic Relief recognised that community groups need to tell us what is important so it is less target focused'*.