

# Dormant Assets NI Phase 1 Grant Programme

## Evaluation case study: Bolster Community

### Case study summary

- Bolster Community is a charity and social enterprise based in Newry and Kilkeel, which offers a range of support to the local community around three key workstreams – Ability (supporting children and young people of mixed ability), Family (supporting parents and families) and Seniors (supporting older people in the community).
- Bolster Community secured £100,000 funding from the Dormant Assets NI programme to diversify their income streams and strengthen their expertise in business development and marketing, via the recruitment of a Business Development Manager.
- The funding was awarded for the March 2022 – March 2025 period. In response to difficulties in recruiting a Business Development Manager, Bolster Community adopted a hybrid approach, bringing in sales and enterprise expertise via a retail consultant, and strengthening their marketing offer via the recruitment of a part-time in-house Communications and Marketing Manager.
- The funding also played a central role in supporting the delivery of the Bolster Buddies programme, which launched in May 2022. This is a Self-Directed Support (SDS)-funded service that provides Short Break Opportunities - young people with additional needs are supported to make candles for Bolster Community’s ACORN social enterprise, while receiving support to promote their independence and improve their life skills. This hybrid approach – referred to by the organisation as “Candles & Care” – enabled the organisation to generate income while also providing support.
- As a result of the Dormant Assets NI funding and related programmes of activity, Bolster Community reported that their generated income (through Short Break Opportunities, ACORN and training programmes for parents and children) now accounts for 68% of their overall income, while previously this had been c30%. They also report significant growth in their social media reach. Bolster Community staff members highlighted the opportunity to focus on sustainability and longer-term growth as a key outcome brought about as a result of the grant funding.

### Introduction

Bolster Community (previously known as Space NI) is a charity and social enterprise based in Newry and Kilkeel, which has been operating for 20 years. It provides support across three key workstreams – **Ability** (focused on supporting children and young people of mixed ability, including neuro-diverse young adults and young adults with learning disabilities), **Family** (focused on providing practical and therapeutic support to parents and children) and **Seniors** (focused on providing dedicated support to older people to tackle social isolation). They provide a range of support services across these three workstreams, in addition to running a social enterprise, ACORN. ACORN aims to



generate profit for the charity via the sale of candles, diffusers and soaps, which are made by young adults with learning disabilities as part of a day opportunity, or ‘Short Break Opportunity’ service (Bolster Buddies) offered under the Ability workstream.

The organisation is funded through local Health and Social Care Trusts and other organisations buying their services, alongside grant funding, and generated income through programme and retail sales.

This case study is based on interviews with four members of staff at Bolster Community, conducted during an in-person visit to their Newry premises in November 2024, and a review of relevant documentation including Bolster Community’s 2024/25 Annual Impact Report, their Strategic Plan 2025-2030, their Dormant Assets NI funding application and two progress reports, and evaluation survey response.

## Delivery

Bolster Community’s key aim for the Dormant Assets NI funding was to **diversify their income streams**, strengthen their expertise in **business development and marketing**, and **ensure the longer-term sustainability of their organisation**.



**It’s hard to think big when living small.**

**Bolster Community Dormant Assets NI funding application**

*“We often use the phrase ‘it’s hard to think big when living small’ [...] We are at a stage in the growth of the organisation where we need dedicated staff with a focus on income growth to ensure our longer term sustainability and ability to meet the growing needs of our community.”*

### **Bolster Community Dormant Assets NI funding application**

Bolster Community applied for £100,000 of funding from Dormant Assets NI, to cover a period of three years, with the **key goal of recruiting a Business Development Manager (BDM)**. In addition to the BDM post, the funding was to be used to **buy in professional marketing and retail support** “to ensure sales and opportunities are maximised, to build a sustainable offer,” and to **support attendance at trade fares/conferences and business-to-business retail shows**. Bolster Community had recently commissioned an independent review which found that the organisation would benefit from a hybrid approach to income generation of both sales and grant funding, which informed their application.

Bolster Community staff members spoke of the challenge of balancing service provision with business development and income growth:

*“It’s the dilemma of our sector - and the VCSE sector more generally. We expect a lot of our staff, but taking the social enterprise to the level we took it required a whole new set of skills and resources we didn’t have.”*

### **Bolster Community staff member**

The BDM role was anticipated to help strengthen the capacity of the organisation, develop new social enterprise products and services, and explore new markets and funding opportunities; it was expected that social enterprise profits could also be reinvested into the organisation and fund staff training and development alongside other support programmes.

The organisation was awarded the full amount of Dormant Assets NI funding applied for, in March 2022. However, Bolster Community faced unexpected challenges in recruiting into the BDM role, which staff members noted as a wider issue in the VCS sector in NI over recent years, with a lack of potential recruits with business development expertise. They eventually changed their approach by **bringing in sales development expertise via a retail consultant**, and hiring a **part-time Communications and Marketing Manager**.

Staff spoke positively about this hybrid approach – working with the retail consultant allowed for external expertise to be flexibly fed in the organisation, while the Communications and Marketing Manager brought insight and knowledge to enhance day-to-day operations. The staff member recruited into this post noted the importance of external outreach:

*“I can’t imagine [the existing workforce of] Bolster [Community] juggling this – being able to do their jobs and offer services, and the role of comms and marketing, and outreach for both the charity and the enterprise. But it’s such a big part of it – communicating with people and with businesses.”*

### **Bolster Community Communications and Marketing Manager**

A key part of Bolster Community’s story over this period has been the **Bolster Buddies service**, which came about as a result of collaboration with Southern Health and Social Care Trust, and involved working closely with the retail consultant. As part of the ACORN social enterprise, Bolster Community had previously brought in young adults from the community to volunteer as part of a Short Breaks Opportunity. Via this work, Bolster Community noticed that a number of this cohort required more consistent or longer-term support and were also entitled to Self-Directed Support (SDS) that they were not claiming:

*“Through the social enterprise, we were taking in young adults to volunteer. But it transpired that they were in need of our support, rather than providing input.”*

### **Bolster Community staff member**

Bolster Community staff met with staff from a local health and social care Trust who advised that this service would meet the requirements for an SDS-purchased service, and in May 2022, the Bolster Buddies service was launched. The service is aimed at promoting independence and improving life skills. Young people are paired with a Support Worker and become candle makers for the ACORN social enterprise. The service now generates an income of £150,000 (forecasted for this to be £180,000 by the end of this financial year) for Bolster Community. Staff noted that this hybrid approach – service provision paired with social enterprise, which they refer to as “Candles & Care” – as a key factor in their success over this period, and is expected to contribute to the organisation’s longer-term sustainability.

In addition, Bolster Community began to offer evidence-based training programmes for parents and children over this period, such as the [Friends Resilience programme](#), raising significant income (approximately £300,000) as part of a cross-border project. Currently the Public Health Agency and the Southern Health & Social Care Trust are commissioning a smaller number of these training programmes from Bolster Community.

## Outcomes and impacts

Bolster Community staff members highlighted **the opportunity to focus on sustainability and longer-term growth** as a key outcome of the Dormant Assets NI funding, and the transformational impact this has had on their organisation.



**We were so tight on driving resource in and down – we did not have time to drive it up and out.**

**Bolster Community staff member**

*“It’s a big culture change for the VCSE sector. That was made easier by the introduction of the Fund. For once, [through] having a dedicated fund aimed at financial sustainability, we could take a pop at things – we could attend trade fairs, make a pitch. Before this, we’d be arguing about representing our organisation at events. We were so tight on driving resources in and down – we did not have much time to drive it out and up. Dormant Assets NI gave us that conduit to think externally.”*

**Bolster Community staff member**

Dormant Assets NI funding has also played a key role in the success of the Bolster Buddies service: on the retail side, the consultancy and sales support is credited with leading to **sales** via the **development of an online shop and website**; while the Sales and Marketing Manager has focused on social media marketing to **create awareness of the service and the availability of SDS both to agencies and parents/carers**.

Bolster Community highlighted the delivery and expansion of the Bolster Buddies service as the most notable achievement over this period:

*“[The] biggest outcome is the development of Bolster Buddies and long-term sustainability, both for us as an organisation, but also for the community. We’re already taking over a second premises. [It has had] a significant positive impact on people, on place – and the pound. We’re now bringing money in to recruit staff.”*

**Bolster Community staff member**

In relation to **financial sustainability**, Bolster Community reported that their **generated income** (through the provision of training programmes, Short Breaks Opportunities, and ACORN) **now accounts for 68% of their overall income**. Previously this had accounted for c. 30% of their income, having received most of their income via grant funding.

Bolster Community has also seen **significant growth in their social media reach** over the period July 2023 – July 2024, attributed to their recruitment of a Communications and Marketing Manager, as follows:

- Bolster Community’s overall Facebook reach has increased by 47.6% (126.6K engagements)
- Bolster Community’s overall Instagram reach has increased by 160.6% (22.9K engagements)
- Bolster Community’s Facebook visits have increased by 106.6% (76.8K).

In terms of longer-term impacts, the income brought in to the organisation via Bolster Buddies and related SDS payments has enabled the organisation to **increase staffing roles** and **expand to a new premises to offer opportunities to more young adults**. Bolster Community has also made **a commitment to develop a marketing plan and further investment in sales and marketing activities** on a planned and sustained basis. They have also committed to building off this work by exploring ways to further diversify funding; this is outlined in the organisation’s 2025-2030 Strategic Plan, which has recently been published. Under Strategic Objective 3 (‘to develop innovative solutions to address health disparities’), it notes the following aim:

*“Diversify funding sources by exploring new revenue streams, including social enterprises and grants.”*

### **Bolster Community Strategic Plan 2025-2030**

## **Learning**

Bolster Community summarised some key learning points related to their experience of the Dormant Assets NI funding, as follows:

- The importance of focusing **on external facing business development and marketing activity**, especially for an organisation that provides support to the community and may otherwise neglect this element in lieu of service provision:

*“The thought of investing money in comms when it was all project [delivery] staff, and we needed more family support workers... but it’s integral to where we are now.”*

### **Bolster Community staff member**

- The potential to address the issues with recruitment for business development roles by adopting **a hybrid approach involving a mix of consultancy/bought in support and part-time in-house roles**.
  - Bolster Community noted that they have shared this learning with other organisations across the sector, suggesting to them that they could consider bringing in consultancy or shorter-term skills-led contracts and interim business support, rather than focusing on recruiting for one key business development role. A number of those they have shared learnings with are reported to have gone on to successfully receive funding through the Dormant Assets NI Fund.

This learning aligns with the themes of effective practice identified in the First Interim Evaluation Report for Dormant Assets NI; namely the importance of diversification of funding sources and the need to prioritise relationships and partnership working across multiple levels