

# Dormant Assets NI Phase 1 Grant Programme

## Evaluation case study: Crescent Arts Centre

### Case study summary

- The Crescent is an arts and cultural centre located in South Belfast. The organisation secured £30,950 from Dormant Assets NI to diversify its income streams. The project was expected to be delivered between November 2022 and July 2024.
- The grant was used to fund the development of a small retail display in the foyer of The Crescent's building in order to diversify its income streams. Specifically, the award was used for equipment/retail units and stock, artist costs, and consultancy support and training.
- The shop is already generating an income for The Crescent which can be reinvested into the organisation, achieving the key aim to diversify the organisation's income streams. The shop is also helping to promote / increase the visibility of the arts centre and has contributed to The Crescent's wider strategic ambitions to become more locally rooted and to improve its offer for tourists.
- As a result of the Dormant Assets NI funding, The Crescent has been able to deliver project activities associated with effective practice. These include:
  - Maintaining a flexible approach to delivery.
  - Bringing in required skills to support delivery where required.
  - Involving existing staff in delivering activities to support buy-in and engagement.
- Increasing internal capability to support the delivery of activities through training existing staff.

### Introduction

The Crescent is an arts and cultural centre located in South Belfast, half a mile away from Belfast city centre. The Crescent's core activity is delivering courses, events and workshops covering all art forms, ranging from watercolour painting and poetry to yoga and British Sign Language. The centre also delivers the annual Belfast Book Festival, a Music Programme, Artist Residencies and wider support in the community through a youth programme and engagement with schools, and provides office space to nine creative companies. The Crescent is a company limited by guarantee, which employs 14 FTE staff and has an annual turnover of approximately £900k. Most of its income is generated from delivering events and classes, and around a third is from public sector grants.



The Crescent secured £30,950 from Dormant Assets NI to diversify its income streams by establishing a shop. Specifically, the award was used for equipment/retail units and stock, artist costs, and consultancy support and training. The project was expected to be delivered between

November 2022 and July 2024. However, as set out in more detail below, delays in delivery meant that at the time of writing a small amount of funding was still to be spent.

This case study is based on a review of background documentation (including the interim progress report to The National Lottery Community Fund) and three interviews with key members of staff involved in the grant funded project.

## Delivery

The rationale for applying to Dormant Assets NI was to enable the organisation to diversify its income streams. The idea of developing a retail offer to provide another source of unrestricted income<sup>1</sup> had emerged a few years prior to the funding opportunity, but it was considered too risky to pursue without external funding support. Whilst most of The Crescent's income is already unrestricted (i.e. from events/workshops), the organisation was seeking to further diversify its income streams to improve its resilience and sustainability.

The grant from the Dormant Assets NI programme was used to fund the development of a small retail display in the foyer of The Crescent's Grade II listed building (see Figure 1, below). This involved the following activities:

- The purchase and installation of retail units and equipment in the foyer
- Liaison with artists to commission the use of their artwork/images on products
- Design and purchase of a first Edition<sup>2</sup> of products such as postcards, notebooks, tote bags and art materials for sale
- Staff training and development including events attended by the CEO and Communications Manager relating to contract management/intellectual property, sales and picture libraries, and all full-time staff were invited to participate in the product development process and attend meetings with the consultants<sup>3</sup>.

There was one planned project activity which The Crescent decided not to progress: the development of strategic plans. Initial conversations were held with several consultants, and the advice was to 'learn by doing.' Rather than spending time and money on developing plans, they proceeded with developing a retail offer. As a result, there is £2,400 in outstanding grant funding to be spent by Friday 28 February 2025. The aim is to spend this on evaluation and development of recommendations for future Editions of the shop. Expenditure will include a detailed report looking at the shop's performance to date, and contribution to a second Edition of products as recommended by the report.

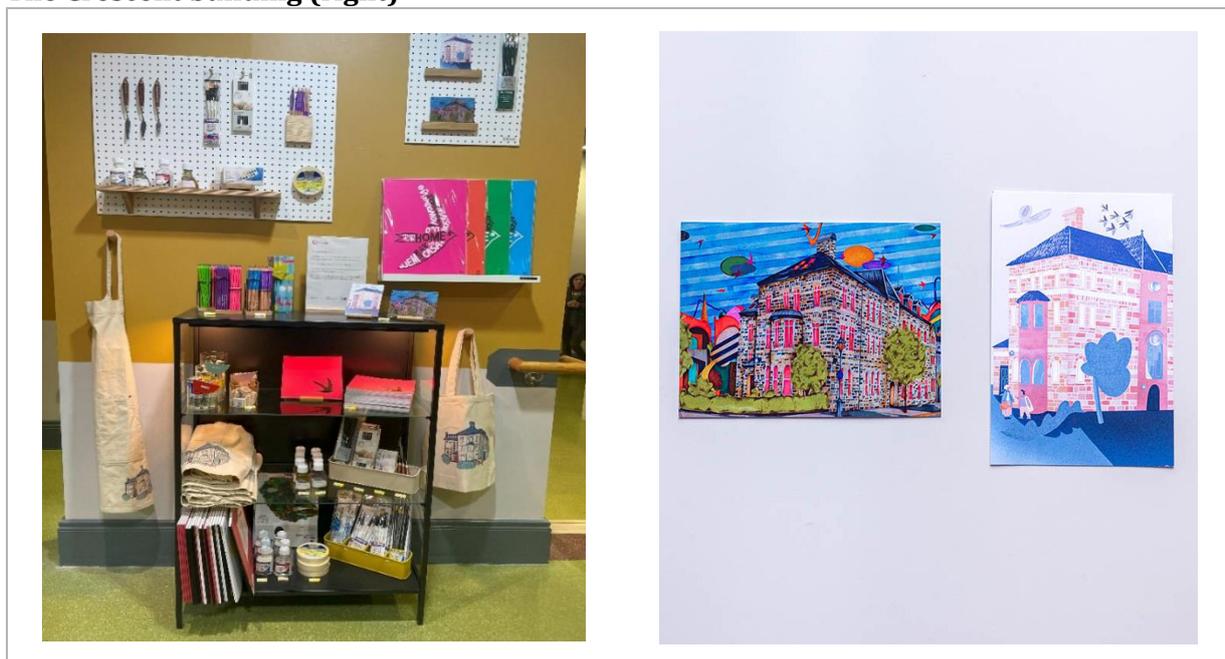
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<sup>1</sup> i.e. income which can be used for any purpose by the organisation, rather than grant funding which has to be used for specific activities in line with the grant contract

<sup>2</sup> An 'Edition' is the term used when describing the complete collection of multiple artworks created within a single given series

<sup>3</sup> Two consultants were engaged: one to support with research and analysis and contacting suppliers, and the other a business consultant to provide expert oversight.

**Figure Error! No text of specified style in document.-1: The shop (left) and two postcards of The Crescent building (right)**



*Source: The Crescent*

## Outcomes and impacts

**The key aim to diversify the organisation's income stream has been achieved.** Whilst modest to date (c. £5k in aggregate), the shop is already generating an income for The Crescent which can be reinvested into the organisation. Looking forward, the ambition is to increase sales. They are in the process of developing an online shop on their website (which will have a broader product offer), linking the shop to other areas of sales e.g. gift vouchers for courses & workshops, and exploring how to expand the shop by reimagining and redesigning the layout of the ground floor of the building.

In addition to providing an income, the shop also provides other benefits. All products for sale have a direct link to the organisation/building. Through purchasing products, people help to **promote the arts centre and increase its visibility**. Second, it has **contributed to The Crescent's wider strategic ambitions** to become more locally rooted and to improve its offer for tourists. All the products are designed by local artists, including staff at the arts centre. Furthermore, whilst there is currently no exhibition(s) for visitors, staff can talk about the products, which provides some narrative on the history of the building and organisation.

At an individual level, the grant has **delivered benefits for local artists** through commissioning their work to be featured on the products. It has supported (emerging) artists financially and has increased the visibility of their work.

The overall aim of Dormant Assets NI Phase 1 was to improve capacity, resilience and sustainability amongst VCSE organisations. There has been progress against this aim in relation to The Crescent.

The shop has diversified their income by providing an additional source of unrestricted income, and therefore the sustainability and resilience of the organisation has improved. Furthermore, the capability of the organisation has improved through staff gaining new skills and knowledge in product development and sales.

## Learning

The key factors that enabled the delivery of the project included:

- The **overall aim of the project was clearly defined**, and the project activities were designed to address a specific challenge facing the organisation. The focus on delivering a ‘tangible’ output (i.e. a new product range) was reported to have offered a stimulating change from the organisation’s usual focus on behavioural change.
- Linked to the above, **project activities were strongly aligned to wider strategic priorities**, notably ambitions for The Crescent to become more responsive to the local community and tourists. This included commissioning the designs of local artists only – including the artwork of some staff at The Crescent – to be used on the products.
- **Involvement of staff early in the process**. This helped to secure buy-in to the concept/process and supported skill development. It was also credited with ensuring staff are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to continue delivering the retail offer post-grant funding.
- **The design and delivery of the Dormant Assets NI grant programme was flexible and supportive**. For example, some project activities were delayed (as explained below) but The National Lottery Community Fund allowed the delivery timescales to be extended so that activities could be delivered in full.

The main challenge was that the project took longer to deliver than anticipated. This was attributed to several factors including:

- **Internal capacity constraints** – involving the team in delivery was important, but the team is small, and project related tasks were additional to their existing roles.
- **Inexperience in retail/sales, which meant insufficient time was allocated to tasks** (e.g. contractual/copyright discussions, the process of ordering and modifying sample products) at the application stage.
- **The key learning emerging is that it is important to set realistic timelines for delivering diversification projects**. At the project design stage, developing a timeline with flex for unexpected issues could help to mitigate against delays. It is also important that timelines allow staff with limited capacity to contribute to delivering project activities.
- **Another challenge was the limited space in which to locate the shop**. The shop has been positioned along one wall in the foyer near the front desk. It is only a small area, but the building is Grade II listed which restricts the ability of the organisation to alter the building’s structure.

The ability to expand the shop in future is therefore constrained. This said, options to overcome this are being considered currently by the management team (see below).

As a result of the Dormant Assets NI funding, The Crescent has been able to deliver project activities associated with effective practice<sup>4</sup>. These include:

- **Maintaining a flexible approach to delivery.** For example, The Crescent listened to the advice from external consultants to 'learn by doing,' rather than using resource to develop a strategic plan(s). Flexibility was also enabled by the programme design, allowing additional time for activities to be delivered due to delays.
- **Bringing in required skills to support delivery where required.** The Crescent identified gaps in their knowledge and skills (such as copyright) and sought to fill these by appointing expert consultants and attending training sessions/events. Bespoke training received was reported to have been particularly relevant to both the organisation and the project.
- **Involving existing staff in delivering the project to support buy-in and engagement.** Involving staff in project activity from the outset was considered fundamental by The Crescent's management team. For example, all full-time staff were invited to participate in the product development process. This supported buy-in during the project, and post-grant is expected to support staff commitment to the new venture.
- **Increasing internal capability to support the delivery of project activities through training existing staff.** It was important for The Crescent to enhance internal capability (in product development and sales), so that staff could support with the delivery of grant funded project activities. This improved capability is also expected to help the organisation to sustain and grow their retail offer in future.

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<sup>4</sup> As set out in SQW's Dormant Assets NI evaluation first interim report