

Dormant Assets NI Phase 1 Grant Programme

Evaluation case study: Developing Healthy Communities

Case study summary

- Developing Healthy Communities (DHC) is a Derry based charity with a mission to promote health and tackle health inequalities. They received a £95,597 award through the Dormant Assets NI programme to fund a full-time Operations Manager post from January 2022 to January 2024.
- The Operations Manager modernised a number of DHC's policies, procedures and processes. These have helped to increase DHC's organisational capacity through more efficient systems, upskilled staff and improved staff morale.
- The Chief Executive and the Operations Manager worked together on diversifying DHC's sources of income. This resulted in successful grant funding bids to the Rank Foundation and the Ideas Fund. The Operations Manager worked with a colleague to develop DHC's social enterprise offer, increasing its revenue from corporate organisations. Organisation leads think it unlikely that this funding diversification would have been possible without the Operations Manager, given DHC's capacity constraints.
- In taking on operational responsibilities, the Operations Manager freed up the Chief Executive to undertake strategic initiatives. This included greater engagement with the World Health Organisation's Healthy Cities in Derry and Strabane initiative, along with strengthening relationships with other key strategic partners and local community development organisations.
- DHC's experience of the Dormant Assets NI funding has resulted in four key areas of learning, which may be transferrable to other VCSE organisations. These are:
 - be clear at recruitment about the skills and competencies needed
 - sharing learning and networking with other VCSE organisations is valuable
 - consider the capacity and resourcing implications for follow-on work
 - consider timescales for implementation and outcomes realisation, and plan for sustainability, at the outset.

Introduction

Developing Healthy Communities (DHC) is a Derry based charity with a mission to promote health and tackle health inequalities. DHC is a small organisation, employing c.15 staff, and works with a range of partner organisations in helping to deliver its activities. The organisation works across Northern Ireland (NI) to deliver a number of different initiatives, including:



- **The World Health Organisation (WHO)'s Healthy Cities in Derry and Strabane** - bringing business, community and public sector leaders together to promote the importance of health inequalities in public sector decision-making.
- **The Clear Project** – which supports a network of organisations working to prevent suicide, self-harm, and drug and alcohol misuse, through training, grants and capacity-building.
- **The Ideas Fund** – designed to help boost public health through developing and testing ideas for improved mental wellbeing.
- **Work Well, Live Well** – involving training of Workplace Health Champions, as well as consultancy and mentoring activities, to tackle health inequalities in the workplace.

DHC received a **£95,597 award through the Dormant Assets NI programme, awarded in August 2021**. The award was used to fund a full-time Operations Manager post from January 2022 to January 2024. Through the post, DHC aimed to bring in operational expertise to help modernise the organisation's ways of working, and to free up capacity of the Chief Executive to deliver strategic initiatives to support organisational resilience

This case study is based on interim and end of grant reports, DHC's own organisational impact report¹, learning shared at the Dormant Assets NI Learning Event (March 2024), as well as interviews with two key members of staff within the organisation.

Delivery

The Dormant Assets NI award **funded the salary for a full-time Operations Manager**, responsible for delivering DHC's operational activities, and enabling the Chief Executive to focus on strategic priorities. The Operations Manager was recruited externally. The Operations Manager transformed DHC's ways of working, including:

- Updating policies and procedures
- Creating staff training and development plans
- Conducting a workplace restructure
- Implementing new digital systems (e.g. Salesforce as a new Grant Management System, Xero as an electronic accounting system)
- Introducing a new communications strategy and new website
- Overseeing delivery of some of DHC's day-to-day activity (including acting as the development coordinator for the Ideas Fund).

The Chief Executive and the Operations Manager **initially focused on income diversification**. Despite some initial difficulties, suitable funding streams were identified and applied for. This

¹ [Developing Healthy Communities Impact report 2023-24](#)

resulted in two successful bids, including three-year funding for a Digital Marketing Assistant from the Rank Foundation, and regional partnership funding from the Ideas Fund. It is considered unlikely that these funding opportunities would have been identified or had applications developed had the Operations Manager not been in post, given DHC's capacity constraints.

The Operations Manager worked with the Health@Work NI Programme Manager to develop DHC's social enterprise offer (called 'Team Health'), which provides bespoke employee health checks for employers. While this offer existed prior to the Dormant Assets NI funding award, it was only a relatively small part of DHC's work. The Operations Manager and the Programme Manager collaborated to develop branding and promotional materials, and developed the offer itself. The aim was to bolster an alternative source of income for DHC, and expand activities funded by the private sector.

DHC underwent a period of transition between September 2022 to March 2023. This included the appointment of a new Chief Executive, staff relocation and a subsequent workplace restructure. In March 2023, DHC experienced a cyber-attack. In response, the Operations Manager worked with a new IT infrastructure partner to **improve DHC's systems and protect the organisation from similar threats in future.**

Outcomes and impacts

Realised outcomes and impacts

As a result of project activities delivered by the Operations Manager, **DHC has implemented a number of new structures and processes.** Examples include monthly team meetings, several electronic management systems, and organised team events. While the Operations Manager has now left the organisation, these processes have been sustained and are **credited with enabling the organisation to operate more efficiently, freeing up capacity.**

The changes were also credited with enhancing **the organisation's culture of improvement.** For example, the training and development plans for staff helped to identify suitable training opportunities, which were then pursued. These included leadership and management qualifications for senior members of staff. As well as fostering an improvement culture, these were credited with equipping the organisation's leaders with enhanced skills and capabilities. One example included a senior staff member undertaking an ILM Level 5 Leadership & Management qualification, improving their leadership skills and developing their strategic thinking.

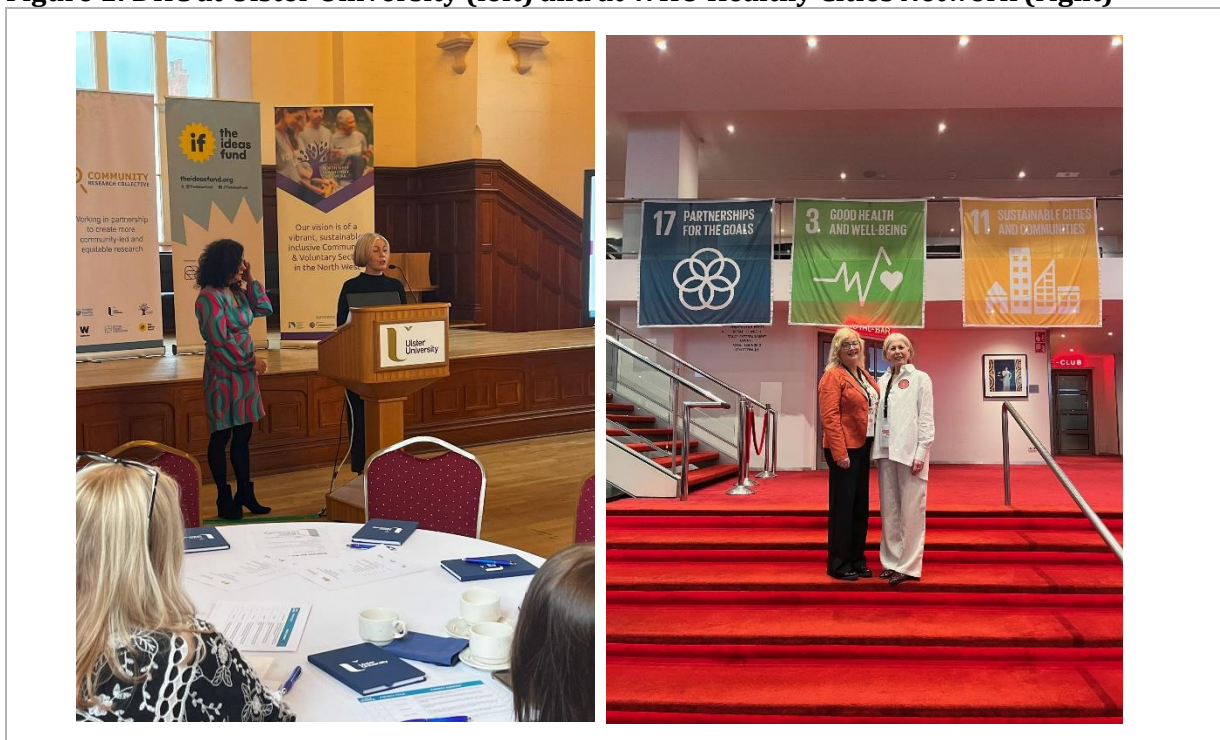
Ensuring organisational financial stability was a key objective of the grant funded project activity. The Operations Manager worked alongside others to review budgets and identify alternative funding streams (securing funding from the Rank Foundation and the Ideas Fund, as described above). The Digital Marketing Assistant remains in post and has helped to support the growth of DHC's social enterprise offer, including working with others to develop branding and promote Team Health on social media. As a result, DHC increased the number of workplaces it engaged with for its workplace employee health check offer. Prior to the rebrand, Team Health only had a handful of workplaces receiving health checks; this increased tenfold as a result of the

rebrand, generating additional non-grant income for the organisation. Team Health has since scaled down following the departure of the Operations Manager, due to lack of capacity and resourcing to manage the scheme.

In addition to securing funding for a Marketing Assistant post, the Operations Manager supported the Chief Executive to **secure funding and deliver activity for the Ideas Fund regional partnership** in NI. The new regional partnership is a c.£90k collaboration between DHC, Ulster University and the North West Community Network, who are working together to help foster partnerships between community groups and academia, in an effort to support more equitable practice across the VCSE sector.

The funding for and recruitment of the Operations Manager enabled the Chief Executive to **spend time engaging with strategic partners**, including Derry City and Strabane District Council, Ulster University, the NI Public Health Agency, and the WHO's Healthy Cities Network, as well as local community development organisations such as the Neighbourhood Renewal Health Improvement Project. These engagements are reported to have built the profile of DHC and led to their involvement in several strategic projects aiming to improve local health and wellbeing.

Figure 1: DHC at Ulster University (left) and at WHO Healthy Cities Network (right)



Source: Developing Healthy Communities

Long term outcomes and impacts

The Ideas Fund regional partnership funding is for an initial two years, and the **relationships and networks established through the work are expected to have a longer-term legacy**. An output from this work is the Communities Research and Innovation Collective, a collaborative community and researcher forum, spanning organisations throughout NI. It is expected that this longer-term partnership will lead to stronger resilience for the community sector as a whole, by fostering

collaboration and continuing the translation of ideas and knowledge from academia into VCSE organisations, and **in turn aid the continued delivery of innovative initiatives to address health inequalities.**

The Operations Manager assisted in the planning, organisation and hosting of a major annual WHO conference in Derry in September 2022 and 2023, involving stakeholders from the UK and the EU. In November 2023, DHC was represented at WHO's Healthy Cities global conference in Utrecht. The learning derived from these events is credited with **enhancing DHC's understanding of the WHO Healthy Cities Framework.** This learning has informed work with Derry City and Strabane District Council, with whom DHC is collaborating to deliver on the Healthy City agenda. It also helped to **promote DHC on an international stage.**

Overall, Dormant Assets NI funding enabled DHC to address many of the challenges it was experiencing prior to receiving the grant. The Operations Manager post that was funded introduced a range of new policies and procedures which are credited with helping DHC to become a more efficient organisation. The organisation's capability has also been enhanced as a result of the learning and development plans introduced and the associated training undertaken by staff.

Despite the improvements, capacity for strategic planning and activity going forward remains constrained. DHC are seeking alternative funding to support core costs.

Learning

As a result of the Dormant Assets NI funding, DHC has been able **to deliver project activities associated with effective practice.** These include:

- Activity delivered directly by the Operations Manager post: the delivery of strategic and operational planning (through a new marketing strategy and digitisation of existing processes), the diversification of funding sources and investment in staff training and development
- Activity delivered as a result of other staff having more capacity: relationship building, partnership working and strengthened leadership and management.

DHC's experience of the Dormant Assets NI funding has resulted in four key areas of learning, which may be transferrable to other VCSE organisations. These are:

- **The importance of being clear about the skills and competencies needed, to inform recruitment.** The skillset of the Operations Manager was credited with leading to successful delivery of the planned project. In particular, it was noted how the postholder's broad ranging knowledge and skills across many functional areas (including HR, Finance, Procurement, IT), ability to learn quickly (i.e. regarding Cyber Security), and ability to think strategically were all central to the achievements realised. The Operations Manager's previous experience informed their work to modernise DHC's processes and systems, and DHC staff noted how this modernisation has helped to develop the organisation's culture into one which embraces change.

- **Sharing learning and networking with other VCSE organisations is valuable.** The Operations Manager attended three Dormant Assets NI workshops for grant holders, designed to share learning from project delivery, reflect on organisational challenges, and encourage networking between VCSE organisations. Following an online workshop in late 2022, DHC collaborated with the Derry Playhouse (another Dormant Assets NI recipient) in its Creative Healthy City work to integrate arts and culture in addressing health challenges.
- **Carefully consider the capacity required for associated or follow-on work.** Dormant Assets NI provided funding for the core costs for the Operations Manager post. However, the work the postholder drove forward led to an increase in activity for DHC. For example, new partnerships formed resulted in the emergence of new projects and workstreams, which required staff time for delivery.
- **Consider implementation and outcome realisation timelines and sustainability planning at the outset.** It takes time for new roles and postholders to become embedded into an organisation, and for the benefits of strategic activity to be realised. Interviewees suggested that funding the Operations Manager post for a longer period may have enabled the role to become self-sustaining, by providing more time for the postholder to further develop income streams for the organisation.
- DHC has begun to share some of its learning around organisational change with other VCSE organisations, including via a learning event held by The National Lottery Community Fund in March 2024, at which DHC shared learning around project delivery with other Dormant Assets NI grant holders.