OUTCOMES AND LEARNING FROM PROJECTS

August 2017

This bulletin looks at the self-reported outcomes and learning from projects after they had come to an end. The findings in this bulletin are based on analysis of the end-of-year monitoring reports that were submitted to the Big Lottery Fund (BLF) in the summer of 2017. A sample of 80 projects were identified and their reports analysed, representing a cross section of different sized organisations (based on turnover) across the regions. This was the same sample used in the analysis of the mid-year reports, but we substituted some organisations because either they had specified that they did not want their forms to be shared with NCVO or they had not returned their forms to BLF by the end of July 2017.

In many cases projects discuss emerging outcomes that are works in progress or are aspirations for the future, and frequently they outline outputs as well as or instead of outcomes. Nonetheless these will be reported on in this bulletin because they provide a valuable insight into the emergent difference that funding is making to organisations and their sustainability.

Projects reported in their own words, responding to open questions; the responses analysed in this report are therefore unprompted which means there was considerable variation in the responses given and the terms used and priorities discussed. This bulletin is first and foremost a qualitative analysis of textual responses but will, where relevant, give a sense of how many organisations reported on a particular topic to give a sense of scale.

Project and organisational outcomes

Given the wide variety of definitions of sustainability, organisations tended to describe an equally wide range of outcomes to their LSF funded work. This was often focused on having become – or importantly *becoming* – a more sustainable, resilient, and/or stronger organisation. It included being better able to assess and act on their strengths and weaknesses, and similarly having an improved ability to identify and mitigate risks, being more efficient as an organisation, or having become more flexible and agile. Organisations also outlined specific outcomes (or perhaps indicators of sustainability) related to overall organisational sustainability, including having avoided closure and simply having survived as an organisation, having increased cash reserves, or having reduced the risk of losing their premises:

*‘We are now a much more stable organisation, with a better infrastructure and much more able to respond to day to day challenges.’*

*‘Without the support from the Local Sustainability Fund there would have been a very real risk that there would have been insufficient funding for these services to continue into 2017.’*

*‘Our resilience is improved by our ability to look at ourselves and critically assess our strengths and weakness and to work out ways to make improvements. We feel stronger, more sustainable, and more resilient as a result of the work we've done over the past 12 months and this will continue into the future.’*

Organisations also reported on the following outcomes, which are reported on in the order of popularity in which they were discussed in the end-of-year monitoring forms:

(a) Improved connection to beneficiaries and service users

This was the most frequently mentioned outcome, with 34 organisations describing outcomes that related to having developed a better connection or service to their beneficiaries. In some cases the organisation’s survival had meant that they had the ability to continue to provide services to their beneficiaries (particularly notable for those organisations whose survival was more doubtful prior to funding), but for others the organisational growth and expansion they had seen with LSF meant that they could provide a greater range of services to a greater number of people, expanding their reach.

In other cases the outcomes were focused on improved relationships with beneficiaries, specifically around better and more regular feedback, dialogue and communication, which together helped enhance their understanding of beneficiary need and fed in to the development of services and continuous improvement of the organisation’s offer.

(b) Improved governance and leadership

Improvements in governance was mentioned by 28 organisations when describing their project outcomes, indicating the importance grant holders placed on board development as part of their journey towards sustainability. This often concerned improving the systems and processes of governance, with grant holders describing improved reporting, the introduction of sub committees and better internal functioning, and new, and enhanced induction of board members. Subsequently, organisations described better involvement and engagement from their boards, increased proactivity on the part of trustees, an improved understanding of their roles and commitments, and an improvement in the skills of board members (as well as a better recognition of skills gaps):

*‘The board have become more proactive. This means they are more able to scrutinise the work, the vision and the financial planning.’*

*‘In particular the work to improve the governance arrangements of the organisation and take a more dynamic approach to assessing and acting on risks and opportunities has meant that we are more resilient and able to operate in an ever-changing external environment.’*

*‘Our Board and Governance review and action planning is probably the best thing we have done in this area during the year. Our Board of trustees have moved from a fairly passive position to one where they are proactive.'*

While distinct from improvements in board functioning, organisations also frequently discussed outcomes related to the leadership of the organisation by senior staff. This included having developed a stronger senior management team, which could be the result of having increased skills amongst senior leaders within the organisation, the SMT having become better at working together and delegating responsibility to others, and SMT having an improved understanding of their roles and commitments.

(c) Improvements in staffing

Twenty-five organisations described improvements in staffing, although many were focused on outputs rather than outcomes, such as the introduction of new and improved management and human resource processes (e.g. new ways to undertake appraisals and performance management, and new systems of training) or the restructuring of staff teams. Various outcomes were nonetheless identified, including describing improvements in staff morale, improvements in skills, increased resilience, improvements in recruitment, and improved buy-in from staff about change and better understanding of sustainability throughout the organisation:

*‘Staff development, restructuring and training is building a resilience within the staff team. It has also made a more proactive team which moves forward confidently and with a greater ability to adapt to change.’*

(d) Income diversification

Organisations frequently appeared to view their sustainability in terms of the extent to which they had diversified their income base; specifically, their success in reducing dependency on grant funding. Twenty-one organisations described outcomes related to income diversification, most commonly around having increased the amount of earned income through the development of new products and services or the creation of a social enterprise element to their work. Organisations also discussed having gained new income from contracts, and having improved their position to bid for contracts in the future:

*‘We now have a successful business which generates a substantial proportion of our core running costs. We are now far less dependent on specific grants for core funding which means we can focus on fundraising efforts more on activity costs.’*

*‘We have moved from being grant dependent to successfully winning substantial long term contracts from the public sector.’*

*‘By not being reliant on grant income and building a sustainable business without the need of grant income will protect the service from the ever-decreasing grant income pot.’*

As well as diversifying income, organisations (albeit not as many) noted that they had seen an absolute increase in income as a result of LSF and a subsequent growth in the organisation (which was often related to providing more services to beneficiaries).

*‘We have increased our income significantly and anticipate a period of growth.’*

(e) Improved volunteer management support and involvement

Organisations frequently saw improvements in volunteering as an important outcome of their LSF work, having been mentioned by 17 organisations. This had sometimes involved specific changes (outputs) such as changes to the training provision of volunteers or how they were recruited. The subsequent outcomes were often discussed in broad, generic terms such as having improved the overall volunteering model or processes of involvement, but a range of important, more specific changes were also outlined including: improvements in volunteer satisfaction and a happier volunteer body; better communication to volunteers; improved volunteer-staff relationships; an expansion of areas in which volunteers were involved; and an increase in the skills set of volunteers.

(f) Improved systems, processes and infrastructure

Organisations described a range of outputs and outcomes connected to how their organisations functioned and behaved, including:

* Improved IT systems (e.g. the introduction of a new server or database systems), contributing to better organisational functioning;
* Improved marketing, including an enhanced web presence;
* Improved financial processes, systems and skills, helping to contribute to better financial forecasting and planning;
* Enhanced project management, leading to better-managed activities;
* Quality accreditation.

*‘We have increased efficiency and productivity by updating IT and implementing SAGE. This enables better forecasting as well as in time reporting and cash flow management, supporting strategic financial planning and the board’s ability to plan financially as well as manage day to day finance.’*

*‘We feel that we now have systems and processes in place to ensure we are an organisation that continuously improves and is an agile organisation.’*

*‘The purchase of a new database has helped us continually look for ways to improve the way we work, forward plan, and ensure the ongoing success and relevance for our beneficiaries.’*

(g) Increased confidence

Organisations described how they had become more confident as a result of their LSF work. This included having been reassured of the value and relevance of their organisation’s mission (see also following section on learning) and being more confident about the need for the work they did, something that was often gained from having seen the value that others, particularly those in the public and private sectors, placed on their work:

*‘I have to say we feel more confident and indeed see a new energy in our day-to-day work and strategic approach.’*

*‘We feel more confident in fighting for our cause and values.’*

It could also include being more confident about the future of their organisation, which they could feel was in a more stable, and sustainable, position as a result of the funding.

(h) Better strategic planning and thinking

While related to many of the previous outcome areas, organisations often specifically mentioned changes in how they undertook strategic planning. This could involve having developed a stronger focus (and thereby avoiding mission drift within the organisation) and having strengthened their organisational vision and objectives, with increased buy-in and engagement from across the organisation (in terms of staff, volunteers, trustees, and service users):

*‘We're more focused about what we do and the outcomes we want to achieve. Despite continuing to meet a wide range of need, our services are now more clearly defined; we can articulate more clearly the work we do; we are more disciplined about which funding opportunities we will pursue.’*

This could also include improvements in the strategic planning process:

*‘The LSF investment has helped us to improve our forward planning processes. We now hold regular strategic planning meetings to look for continual improvements.’*

(i) Improved monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment

Improvements in how organisations gathered and used evidence were frequently seen, with grant holders noting that they were subsequently better able to communicate the difference their organisation made to funders and other stakeholders (and thereby potentially improving their chances of being successful with funding bids in the future) or could use the data and insight to improve and enhance their services and projects:

*‘We have improved the way we are to evaluate and measure our impact and have produced an impact report enabling us to demonstrate our ongoing successes for our beneficiaries.’*

*‘We can now evidence and communicate the benefits of the services we provide, and make a compelling case to commissioners and other purchasers about the value of our work.’*

(j) Better partnerships and collaboration

This included the development of new partnerships and relationships, as well as increasing the number of contacts, supporters, relationships and networks. This was most specifically discussed with regard to improvements in relationships with business and having a greater capacity to engage with business. In a limited number of cases, organisations made reference to outcomes around forthcoming mergers with other organisations, something which had been the objective of their funded work:

*‘The current planned merger will provide a more robust, sustainable and resilient charity, able to cascade good practice and take up new opportunities and funding streams.’*

*‘Our developing partnerships and potential merger will lead to cross organisational learning, better and more innovative ways to support service users and give us the potential for growth and diversification.’*

Learning from projects

In the end-of-year monitoring forms organisations were asked to describe what they had learnt, in their own words. Many organisations discussed multiple different lessons and as such there is often overlap between the categories specified here. Furthermore, in some cases, the learning identified can overlap considerably with the outcomes described in the previous section; learning is effectively an important outcome in itself.

(a) It takes time

This was the most common response, mentioned by 26 of the organisations in the sample. Many organisations described the challenges that came with a 12-month timescale and stated that their biggest learning was that projects of this nature frequently needed more time or simply took a lot more time than they had expected:

*‘The main point which became clear to us is that sustainability is not something which can be achieved in a 12-month period. It is something which takes a considerably longer period to achieve, and in some ways I feel that we are only just getting started on the long journey which we are on to ensure that we will always be here as a strong, viable, and sustainable organisation.’*

As such, organisations said they had learnt about the need to be persistent and not give up, and to have patience as much change could be gradual. Organisations also outlined more practical elements regarding time, including understanding more about the value of freeing up staff time to focus on strategic issues, the importance of allowing other staff to concentrate on their day-to-day work, or the need to invest in management time:

*‘I think the main learning point has been that you need to make space to do this. As a very lean and responsive voluntary sector organisation, we are often drawn into long periods of 'fire-fighting' which is very draining on staff time and means there is little space for forward planning.’*

*‘We've learned the value of carving out time to focus on key areas of work which can get lost in managing the demands of front-line work.’*

Organisations also frequently noted that they had learnt that change cannot all happen at the same time and having realistic expectations was important in such projects, specifically in terms of what they could achieve and deliver in terms of activities within the time or resources available:

*‘On reflection, we were overly ambitious in attempting to develop a more diversified income stream in parallel with significant infrastructure development.’*

Other projects discussed the value of pacing their work and the importance of being kind to themselves in terms of what had been achieved.

(b) The value of external input

This was the second most common response, identified by 15 organisations, likely reflecting the importance of the external advisor and business partner roles to the LSF funding model. Organisations described the value and importance of having an external, often challenging, voice and how bringing in new perspectives could add a great deal to their work.

*‘External support and challenge for managers is valuable and productive and helps drive innovation and learning.’*

*‘The importance of having an external advisor cannot be underestimated, the input they provided to the organisation has been part of the critical success factor in the last 12 months.’*

*‘External objective support is very important when faced with significant organisational change especially for staff members living with uncertainty and the advisor’s role has enabled effective support, objective analysis and enhanced credibility when presenting revised business plans to funders.’*

(c) Collaboration and partnership is important

This included developing a greater appreciation of the value of networks, including informal sharing of learning, and the value of relationships with businesses.

(d) The need to embrace change

All projects within LSF, to some degree or another, involved change and a considerable area of learning for many organisations appeared to be the need to value and embrace change as part of a journey towards greater organisational sustainability. Learning included simply that change is often uncomfortable and challenging, that it is inevitable, and that people should not be afraid of it:

*‘You only get out what you put in and there has to be a commitment throughout the organisation. Be prepared to be challenged and be prepared to work through change. Do not be afraid of change as with it comes opportunities.’*

There appeared to be recognition, however, that some people will be afraid of change and organisations also discussed practical learning which included how to encourage ownership of change amongst staff, how to better manage change within an organisation, and how to manage resistance to change:

*‘To involve as many staff as possible in the process of change so all are on board and can share the excitement.’*

(e) The importance of reflection and humility

Understanding that learning was an important part of the process was also discussed by organisations. This could often be focused on learning to have a degree of humility, with organisations describing the value of recognising weaknesses, acknowledging limitations to their knowledge and asking for help, being open to be challenged, and recognising that making – and learning from – mistakes was an important part of the process:

*‘We had a tendency to do too much ourselves and were reluctant to ask for help; we now approach the next 10 years of the charity’s development with a different mindset.’*

(f) Re-affirmation of the value of the organisation’s work

An important area of learning for many organisations was that the work that they were undertaking and delivering as an organisation was valuable in itself. To some organisations, they had simply learnt, or been reminded, that their mission was important and that they were doing much right. This was often re-affirmed by seeing that people external to their organisation – including business and the public sector – valued what they were doing. This connects to the outcome mentioned in the previous section about an increase in confidence amongst individual staff and throughout the organisation.

(g) The importance of flexibility and proactivity

Echoing the earlier point about the challenge of change, organisations described how they had learnt about the importance of being flexible and adapting their work on an on-going basis, noting that unexpected things would often happen and a change in course was often required. This also included learning that this frequently needed to be done quickly and proactively.

(h) Technical learning and specific areas of work

While many of the previous areas of learning have described more conceptual and cultural ways of working, organisations also identified specific topics they had learnt about as a result of their involvement in LSF. This included, for example, how to use social media more effectively, how to set up a trading arm, how to undertake cash flow forecasting, ways to generate additional income from wider sources, and business skills. Other specific elements of work and how an organisation functions included learning the value and importance of the following (there is considerable connection to the outcomes discussed in the previous section):

* Having a strategic approach;
* Investing in volunteers and staff;
* Good communication and dialogue;
* Evidence and impact assessment;
* Income diversification;
* Good knowledge of beneficiary need;
* Good organisational processes and systems;
* Strong governance and leadership.

Sharing learning with others

Nearly all of the organisations in the sample had shared the learning from their LSF projects in some way, and only three said they had not, which they reported was because they had not had time or had not had the chance to do so. Many organisations said, however, that they were keen to undertake more sharing of learning in the future and frequently saw this as an on-going part of their work:

*‘We are committed, as part of our journey, to continue to spread our learning to as many people as possible.’*

Of those that had shared learning, the most common way they had done so was throughout their existing organisational networks, which were wider than LSF contacts (35 organisations identified this); this included existing local and regional voluntary sector networks, sector/topic-specific networks, and establishing new networks and forums:

*‘We have been sharing our learning in discussions with other local organisations and to our service users who represent wider constituencies of beneficiaries.’*

Eight organisations reported that they had shared learning specifically through LSF networks, which could be through LSF events organised by BLF or evaluation networking (e.g. the peer visits).

The specific methods and approaches organisations used to share learning were varied but included the following, in approximate order of how commonly they were reported in the end-of-year monitoring forms (these are not mutually exclusive and organisations often identified multiple approaches in their answers):

* Conferences, workshops, meetings and forums (20 organisations): this ranged from attending and sharing learning through networking, to giving presentations, organising their own conferences, or holding, in one instance, a parliamentary reception to share learning from LSF;
* Inviting other organisations to visit them;
* Sharing good practice and advice: this was often topic-specific, including on how to develop social enterprise and Community Interest Companies, how to apply for PQASSO, specific advice on running community facilities, and sharing toolkits that had been developed as part of the project;
* Social media and online: most commonly online case studies and online forums, as well as blogs;
* Coaching and mentoring others: *‘We have also provided some coaching to other organisations to help them to develop themselves and become more sustainable and able to make a greater impact in their community’.*
* Media (radio and television);
* Newsletters and briefings (internal and external);
* Informal conversations;
* Provision of training.

Next steps in the evaluation

To complement this analysis we are also currently analysing results from the final Online Diagnostic Tool that was completed by grant holders at the end of the funding period, and comparing this with the initial results to see what it can tell us about how sustainability within organisations has changed over 12 months. We will be publishing this in a separate bulletin in early autumn.

This bulletin presents some useful information about the emergent difference that LSF funding has made to a sample of organisations that have been funded. As many organisations noted, the outcomes and learning discussed here is very much emergent and the journey towards sustainability is on-going, with many of the impacts likely only to be seen further into the future. Nonetheless, the information here, alongside that from other parts of our evaluation work, will feed in to our final evaluation reporting throughout the autumn. If you have any comments or thoughts based on this bulleting, please do get in touch via [nick.ockenden@ncvo.org.uk](mailto:nick.ockenden@ncvo.org.uk) or take part in the discussion through the online learning network.