



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

RESEARCH

Transformation capital grant programme evaluation: 2017 to 2022 (summary)

The evaluation assesses the functionality of the Programme's process and delivery mechanisms, and whether investments are best targeted to deliver desired outcomes.

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Introduction

The Transformation Capital Grant programme (the Programme) is a fund established to support local museums, archives, and libraries to modernise their facilities, create more sustainable models of delivery, enable joint service working and improve the offer to people and communities. It is managed by the Welsh Government's Culture Division and has distributed just under £5.2 million of grant funding between 2017 and 2022.

The Programme aims to enable successful organisations to transform services to:

- develop a more sustainable model of service delivery
- enhance services to people and their communities
- improve collections development, care, or access
- deliver against strategic priorities and outcomes
- maintain and develop the quality of services

Aims and objectives

OB3 Research was commissioned by the Welsh Government to undertake a process evaluation of the Transformation Capital Grant programme from 2017 to 2022.

The focus of the evaluation is on understanding the functionality of the Programme's process and delivery mechanisms, and whether investments are best targeted to deliver desired outcomes. The findings will inform the design and delivery of future funding rounds.

The specific objectives of the study were to:

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- evaluate programme management, monitoring and evaluation processes and governance
- examine the profile and motivations of successful applicants and explore why eligible organisations who do not apply choose not to
- evaluate grant recipient, and wider sector stakeholders' perceptions and satisfaction of the appropriateness and effectiveness of the programme delivery
- consider whether the programme effectively targets and funds the organisations in most need
- evaluate the extent to which the operations are aligned to key Welsh Government policies and strategic priorities
- evaluate whether the objectives of the Programme address the needs of the sector
- provide an indicative assessment of whether funded projects may achieve longer term outcomes
- identify any key lessons learnt and make practical recommendations relevant to any future programme funding rounds

Methodology

The review, undertaken between December 2021 and June 2022, involved:

- an inception meeting with the evaluation steering group at Welsh Government to agree the work programme
- desk-based research, which involved a review of relevant Welsh Government policy documents, funding, and reporting documentation
- a review of UK-wide evidence sources in relation to capital funding available within the sector
- conducting a series of initial scoping interviews and drafting a Theory of Change logic model for the Programme
- preparing a range of qualitative discussion guides for interviewing Welsh

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Government officials, sector representatives, grant recipients and eligible organisations who have not yet received support

- preparing and distributing two online surveys for previous grant applicants and eligible organisations who have never applied
- interviewing ten Welsh Government officials, nine stakeholders and 20 grant recipients (covering 25 funded projects), four unsuccessful grant applicants and two eligible organisations who had not received support

Main findings

Aims, objectives and rationale for the programme

The review found that the guidance and criteria for the Programme are strongly aligned to those of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, and the funded activities can clearly demonstrate their contribution to the seven wellbeing goals. The contribution of the Programme to the Welsh Government's previous and current Programmes for Government (PfG) are less clear and the current level of funding provided via the Programme does not fully enable the sector to achieve all the key programme aims.

The review of UK wide examples of other capital funds in this sector provides a useful insight into the way the sector is supported elsewhere particularly in terms of the ability to apply for maintenance funding. There are examples elsewhere of funds where the requirements both on applicants, and on administrators is less onerous. These examples are mentioned throughout this report e.g., the Transforming Towns regeneration grant scheme.

The Programme is widely appreciated by the sector and has been designed in a way that has enabled libraries, museums and archives to access capital funds and deliver improvements to their services. The rationale for the Programme itself and its continuation is sound. Libraries in particular appear to be well-

catered for and have been able to access funding from the Programme to make necessary improvements to spaces and digital services, and in some examples, utilised the funding to provide a more innovative offer in their physical spaces. Widening the remit of the fund to cover archives and museums has had more limited utilisation to date. The archive sector in particular have less need for the fund to support physical transformation, whilst the museum sector has more pressing maintenance issues, and therefore struggles to make its needs fit the many strategic criteria requirements of the Programme.

Digital transformation is of particular importance to the libraries, archives, and museum sectors, although it must be recognised that the museum sector is more diverse, with differing needs across local authority and independently run services.

Programme design and administration

Whilst the title of the Programme suggests that its focus is on the 'transformational,' the evidence suggests that the changes achieved by the funding to date are on the conservative side of the transformation scale. It is also evident that the term 'transformation' is very subjective and nuanced, meaning different things to different people.

The sector, as a result of capital under-investment over several decades (as highlighted by the Expert Review of museums) and more recent challenges, remains in need of support to maintain buildings and modernise services. Feedback from the sector suggests that there is appetite to evolve their offer and respond to the needs of citizens and communities into the future. Stakeholders would welcome a mechanism to enable more radical transformation to include innovative and new services in spaces and a tighter focus on co-location and joint working.

Organisations consistently raised the issue of rising costs of materials and

contractors in recent years, and particularly in the last two years since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Feedback from organisations also suggest that the current upper limit of the fund stifles ambition and the ability to be truly transformative and innovative.

Awareness of the existence and general purpose of the fund seems to be relatively high within the sector, as a result of regular correspondence and communication between the Culture Division advisers and their corresponding sector representative organisations. Understanding and knowledge of the Programme's funding is not widely communicated to senior staff and elected members across local authorities, and thus, the funding is not often considered more strategic level investment.

Knowledge and understanding of what the Programme has funded to date, or the type of more innovative approaches that could be eligible for the funding is more limited. The fieldwork also identified a lack of confidence and experience in preparing bids and project managing capital projects within the sector.

Organisations clearly valued the support provided by Culture Division advisers in their preparation of applications and this is an important part of the Programme's current structure that needs to continue. It is crucial that this support function is maintained, and the offer taken up by all those who apply. This is particularly true for smaller organisations or individuals less experienced in bid writing. The assessment process would merit input from additional individuals, external to the division, on the decision-making panel. This would further ensure that the funded projects aligned with developments across other Welsh Government policy areas (such as the arts, sport, regeneration, or tourism).

The annual funding cycle of the Programme was consistently raised as an issue with organisations struggling to spend the money in what was essentially a nine-month window. There was also evidence that such a short timescale to deliver capital projects inevitably stifled the type of ideas that could be presented to the Programme.

Better understanding is required amongst applicants as to what costs could be included in a capital funding bid. It is possible that there has been some confusion or lack of consistency in the past in the way that guidance has been provided or interpreted by Welsh Government staff. Organisations would welcome more flexibility within the Programme so that projects can adapt to changes in planning and cost escalation and ensure that the funding delivers the best possible impact.

Appropriateness and effectiveness of programme delivery

There is evidence in end of project reports, where they exist, that the outputs are being delivered as planned. There is some evidence that intermediate outcomes are being delivered relatively well, but the evidence base could be improved. There is also some anecdotal evidence that services are more sustainable, and in some cases saved from closure, as a result of the Programme's funding.

The focus on increasing joint-working or co-location of services does not seem to have been realised by the Programme to date, in the way that it was originally intended. The current structure and funding available via the Programme are likely to be the reason for this.

Recommendations

The Welsh Government seek to double the amount of funding available via the Programme if it is still committed to achieving these aims, with additional internal administration resources allocated to manage and monitor the Programme if the recommendations are implemented.

The criteria of the Programme are adapted to reflect the identified policy priorities included in the new culture strategy when published.

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The Band A criteria for the Programme is widened to explicitly reference maintenance type improvements.

The Welsh Government implement a simple, one-stage process for Band A funded projects, and maintain the two-stage process for Band B funded projects.

That a review of the application forms and associated processes within other grant schemes is undertaken by Welsh Government, and the good practice adopted where possible.

The application process for the Programme is moved online or utilises electronic application forms in future.

The criteria of the Programme are revisited, so that they are more flexible and better placed to respond to the diverse and unique needs of each of the libraries, archives, and museums sectors. This could include sector-specific weighting to each project criteria or the inclusion of some sector-specific criteria.

The Welsh Government issue a call-out every three years for these large-scale, partnership projects under the Programme, should additional funding be secured.

The upper limit of the fund is increased to £500k.

Communication about the Programme (on the Welsh Government website and via direct email to potential applicants) includes case studies and examples of successful projects in addition to highlighting the application form and guidance available.

All eligible organisations are invited to a workshop (held every two to three years) where case study and best practice examples are presented, and focussed discussions held on any aspect of the Programme where further support would be required.

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Council leaders and elected members, and key senior managers within local authorities are regularly updated about the fund and its impact.

A dedicated adviser is allocated from the outset as a direct contact to all applicants at EoI stage.

The assessment panel includes members who are independent of the support function provided for the Programme's application.

The Welsh Government continues with its revised approach of two-year funding. It should also be clearly communicated to eligible organisations that this new approach (and the higher limit) means that more transformational and/or partnership bids are now possible and would be welcomed.

Applications should be required to provide an overall cost to their project (with an indicative breakdown of costs), but that flexibility is provided within the Programme's total budget to reallocate funds, as necessary.

Welsh Government communicates a consistent message as to what costs can be included as capital expenditure, and stipulates in the guidance that a modest proportion of the funding can be used for small-scale revenue funding in some cases.

The Programme provides a small pot of development funding to support the sector to develop such plans. This seed or development fund could be utilised to pay for feasibility studies or professional services in the planning stage.

End of project reports are requested from all completed projects who have not submitted these to date.

A simple end of project evaluation template is developed, to be completed 12 months after project end, to capture outputs and evidence against the intermediate outcomes outlined in the Theory of Change.

An impact evaluation study be commissioned in due course to validate this evidence and to analyse the extent to which any longer-term outcomes have been achieved.

Contact details

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