



Review of the Fusion Challenge Grants Programme

Executive Summary

1. Research aims and methodology

- 1.1 This report presents the findings from a review of Fusion Challenge Grants, a key aspect of the Fusion programme; a Welsh Government funded initiative aimed at increasing cultural access and participation in areas of disadvantage. Since Fusion Challenge Grants were established in February 2017, eight lead bodies, based across Wales, have delivered strategic cultural programmes aimed at promoting / and or supporting Fusions key outcomes. Fusion Challenge Grants have also funded the role of coordinators within each of these participating partnership areas.
- 1.2 A key part of the ongoing evaluation of Fusion was to review Fusion Challenge Grants and the role of the coordinator as an integral part of this programme. The research aimed to obtain the views and experiences of both local coordinators and the partner organisations coordinators have worked with on the design and delivery of Fusion activities. The findings from this review will contribute towards the evidence base on culture and tackling poverty in Wales which, in turn, will help inform the development of the Fusion programme.
- 1.3 This report is based on findings from an online survey, sent to Fusion coordinators and to stakeholders. The research findings are also based on qualitative interviews with all eight coordinators, as well as interviews with representatives from partner organisations from some of the partnership-area level networks.
- 1.4 The following paragraphs summarise the key findings from the online stakeholder survey and the semi-structured interviews with stakeholders.

2. Key findings

Understandings of the Fusion programme and the role of the coordinator

- 2.1 Overall, both coordinator and partner interviewees were positive about Fusion and their involvement in the programme.
- 2.2 Both sets of stakeholders described how their local networks were hosting a broad range of arts, heritage and culture organisations, in addition to those not necessarily considered as 'typical' cultural organisations, whilst the degree of involvement and engagement of some partners did vary across areas.
- 2.3 For partner organisations, having access to a varied Fusion partnership network in particular was highlighted as being beneficial and a main reason for joining or remaining within the network. These benefits were often phrased in terms of getting something back from the

network, but also in terms of offering their own expertise and resource to a wider network of participating organisations, sharing resources, and working together towards common goals.

- 2.4 Across both groups of stakeholders, there was a consistent understanding of what the Fusion programme was trying to achieve, with some coordinators suggesting that they felt that Fusion partners had a better understanding of the role of Fusion now that it had been established for a number of years. Both sets of stakeholders expressed a strong sense of Fusion's overarching vision of tackling poverty through widening access to culture; through addressing organisational and perceptual barriers, with both groups of stakeholders describing specific outcomes of the programme such as improving health and wellbeing, education and employment. Particular emphasis was also given by partners and coordinators, to the programmes objective of encouraging partnership working across and within sectors, in order to help achieve Fusion's wider aims. The most common incentive for joining the programme among partners, however, was the perception around shared values of Fusions overarching aim of tackling poverty and disadvantage through encouraging cultural participation, and the aims and objectives of their own organisation.
- 2.5 The research also suggested that coordinators are operating in a comparable fashion across areas. The broad scope of the role was highlighted during discussion with stakeholders, in terms of coordinators:
- maintaining oversight and knowledge of their local areas cultural offers (including identifying gaps in provision),
 - growing and maintaining their local partnership networks, and brokering partnerships,
 - communicating with and on behalf of their Fusion partnership networks,
 - helping to deliver Fusion activities themselves.
- 2.6 Conversations around the role did however suggest that some coordinators were often fluctuating between a facilitating and a more hands on delivery role.

The design and delivery of Fusion Challenge Grants

- 2.7 Coordinator interviewees were asked to discuss the process of establishing their local partnership areas. Various factors had enabled coordinators to establish their local Fusion partnerships, including: prior experience of working with Fusion and various hard to reach groups, or the existing partner links of their lead bodies, as well as the willingness of partner organisations. The research presented evidence that local partnership networks were continuing to expand, sometimes without the direct intervention of the coordinator; for example with partners initiating their own involvement in the programme, or being brought on board by other partners – suggesting an element of co-curation in the creation of local partnership networks.
- 2.8 A key success of the programme for both partners and coordinators hinged around the programmes focus on coordinated partnership working in tackling poverty through cultural opportunities, and its success in facilitating stronger inter and cross-sectoral links (e.g. between partners and early years programmes). For coordinator interviewees, partners support and their willingness to embrace the programmes ethos had enabled partnerships to create more opportunities to target groups or bring added value to existing projects or activities.
- 2.9 Participants were also asked for their views on the effectiveness and successes of the programme, as well as on the effectiveness of the coordinator role and whether it is delivering Fusion objectives at a local-area level. Stakeholder's responses highlighted the support role of the coordinator in terms of offering advice and expertise to partners. Specifically, the research indicated that the local Fusion Coordinators are adding value to their local partnership areas, in terms of:

- signposting partner to, and enabling greater access to training opportunities
 - signposting partners to, and supporting with, relevant funding opportunities
 - increasing partner's confidence and knowledge in the areas of accreditation and volunteering opportunities.
- 2.10 When discussing the sustainability of their local partnership networks, both coordinators and Fusion partners felt that this was reliant on local coordination. The local coordinator role was described as integral in terms of: maintaining a strategic oversight of local Fusion partnership; facilitating and maintain regular contact between Fusion partners; and motivating and supporting partners to align and focus their resources and to think and work in more effective ways.

Challenges and areas of improvement

- 2.11 While the research highlighted that stakeholders were keen for their lead organisations or networks involvement in Fusion to continue, research participants identified a number of challenges with their local area network and suggested improvements. Areas for improvement largely hinged around factors relating to communications, for example:
- 2.12 Top down communications: the way in which information was shared between officials at programme level, the lead delivery body and partners within networks was suggested as needing improvement. Some coordinators suggested that clearer and more frequent communications at Fusion programme level, both in terms of messaging around the programmes aims, remit, and outcomes, could improve consistent communications around the programme from and between coordinators and partners.
- 2.13 Marketing and branding: several research participants suggested that improvements could be made to this, which in turn could lead to better awareness and targeting of the programme's activities.
- 2.14 Communication between coordinators: the research highlighted that this tended to be sporadic and light touch, and that there was an appetite between coordinators for more regular, un-facilitated communications with one another, which could support sharing best practise and learning.
- 2.15 Resource constraints were also highlighted by research respondents as a challenge. For example, respondents called for a longer-term investment in Fusion, explaining that such a funding commitment would help them deliver more activities over a sustained period, which would further embed the programme at a local partnership level; as well as help dispel uncertainty and a lack of commitment toward the programme. Having access to no or limited budgets was also described as a challenge by coordinators, in terms of supporting partners to deliver and improve take-up of their Fusion activities. The specific suggestion of having access to a shared pool of money to address this was made by several coordinators.
- 2.16 Difficulties around measuring the impact of cultural activities were raised by several research participants. Many coordinators questioned the short timeframe for delivering outcomes and referred to challenges they had encountered in collecting and disseminating monitoring data such as, lack of understanding amongst partners on the rationale and requirements for collecting and sharing data. Some stakeholders suggested potential solutions, such as better communicating the value of measuring activities' outputs and outcomes and incentivising partners to play a more active role.

3. Conclusions

- 3.1 Overall, stakeholders expressed largely positive attitudes towards the Fusion programme, and Fusion partners interviewed were keen to continue participating in the programme. The research demonstrated that on the whole, Fusion partners were embracing the partnership led approach of the programme, and made regular reference to the benefits this offered, in terms of opportunities for skills sharing, pooling expertise and resources, and working collectively towards the same goals. For coordinators, partners support and their willingness to embrace the programmes ethos had enabled partnerships to create more opportunities to target groups or bring added value to existing projects or activities.
- 3.2 The research highlighted the integral role of the coordinator, in terms sustaining a targeted and coordinated approach among partners when delivering activities – enabled through coordinators strategic oversight of their local partnership areas, and the added support and advice that coordinators are able to offer within their local partnership networks.
- 3.3 The research did however highlight that certain factors could be helping or challenging the delivery of the coordinator role, and participating stakeholders generally, in terms of their involvement in the Fusion programme. For example, while the research highlighted that a key aspect of the coordinator role is focused on communicating the aims and outcomes of the Fusion programme at a local partnership level, the research consistently highlighted that there was room for improvement in relation to the top down communications of the programme (e.g. at Fusion programme level and lead delivery body level), which in turn could better equip coordinators to consistently communicate Fusion’s aims and outcomes locally. It was also suggested by stakeholders that greater resource could be allocated to the programme, for example in terms of long term investment in the programme, and financial resource available to coordinators. It was felt that this could help to support and incentivise partner’s involvement in the programme, as well as support the long term planning of activities and measurement of the programmes outcomes and impact.

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

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