

THE IMPACT OF DEDICATED GRANT MAKING AND CAPACITY BUILDING SUPPORT ON GOVERNMENT POLICY



SUMMARY REPORT

Introduction

Between April 2002 and March 2006 the Voluntary Action Fund (VAF) distributed more than £6.7m to voluntary organisations throughout Scotland from its three funds : the Unemployed Voluntary Action Fund (“UVAF”); the Ethnic Minorities Grants Scheme (“EMGS”); and the Valuing Volunteers Grants Scheme (“VVGS”).

A total of 330 projects were assisted through the UVAF and EMGS programmes, and more than 1500 through the VVGS programme.

The Voluntary Action Fund has to date received all of its funding from the Scottish Executive, through the Social Inclusion and Voluntary Issues Unit and latterly the Equalities Unit.

The research study being reported on here was carried out by Reid-Howie Associates in summer 2006 to examine the impact of this funding on the delivery of relevant areas of government policy and in particular Scottish Executive policy.

This report summarises the main findings.

About the Voluntary Action Fund and the funding programmes studied

“The Voluntary Action Fund believes in the capacity of all people to make a difference in their own lives and in the lives of others. Through effective investment of grants, we will support voluntary organisations to promote equality by tackling barriers to participation and unlocking the energies and talents in Scotland’s communities.”

The VAF mission statement defines the fundamental approach upheld in all of the funding programmes.

The UVAF and EMGS funds were “grass roots” funds. Few of the organisations which received funding were large, even in the context of the voluntary sector. Many of the projects supported were new, with a particular focus on developing services for excluded groups. While disabled people (and older people) and people from ethnic minority communities were the largest beneficiary groups, VAF projects also supported services to a wide range of other groups, including young people, isolated and vulnerable people, victims of crime, homeless people and people affected by low pay and poor health.

The basis of both EMGS and UVAF was to use *voluntary action* to bring about tangible changes, either for individuals, or for communities. In pursuit of this, VAF-funded projects provided a considerable range of services, including:

- Information, often to groups facing additional barriers to accessing information about services, rights or eligibilities
- Advice on, for example, rights and access to services
- Advocacy, generally for groups most often excluded from access to services
- One to one support with a wide range of medical, psychological, behavioural, social and service related issues
- Group support, for example, in a therapeutic setting for clients recently released after a long stay in hospital
- Leisure activities, often linked to a therapeutic purpose, or to reducing isolation, for example among older, or disabled people

These volunteer led services grew from an identified local need which was well evidenced:

“One of the best points about UVAF was that it was targeted specifically at the most disadvantaged groups – it allowed them to put together a project to address local issues. They can then see the impact of their work”.

The impact of the VAF approach

While many grant making bodies simply make funding provision to organisations, VAF took a particular approach to supporting organisations, recognising the need not only for financial support, but also the need to address some of the difficulties organisations faced in applying for, and managing grant funding as well as managing projects. These included, for example:

- problems with the application process (well-documented in research, particularly for small, local organisations)
- managing external funding (including budgeting, monitoring, reporting and evaluation)
- overcoming difficulties and ensuring that the work is carried out
- using the funding to develop organisational capacity to support longer term sustainability.

It is worth noting that each of the case studies and a significant minority of the respondents to the survey believed that they would have been *unable to develop their project*, or deliver their service, without VAF funding.

VAF were at the forefront of developing their approach and led the way for other funders. The key aspects of this which contributed to the success of the funds were:

- The funds were highly visible and VAF staff were proactive in promoting them to community groups, and to intermediaries, such as CVSs and Volunteer Centres
- The funds were highly accessible. Eligibility criteria were modest, and organisations which were not registered charities could apply. Application processes were straightforward, selection criteria transparent, and help was available to applicants at any stage. Projects which were unsuccessful in a first application were often provided with support, which sometimes included financial support, to reapply in the next round
- Feedback was provided to applicants on why they were unsuccessful, and, unusually, on why they *were* successful, in order to help develop the capacity of the organisations concerned
- VAF was prepared to take risks. Many organisations funded through VAF had never had external funding before, and, at the time of application, may have lacked formal structures and policies
- Funding was provided on a guaranteed three-year basis (from both EMGS and UVAF main funds)
- A wide range of support was available to funded projects directly through VAF, including workshops, good practice guidance and advice from programme managers
- VAF took a highly participative and proactive approach to monitoring, with regular visits to projects and straightforward monitoring requirements. (The monitoring requirements for VVGS consisted of a one page report and pictures taken with a disposable camera)
- Although VAF funds were available only for a maximum of three years, support was available to projects to help find new funding, and to manage the transition process

Whilst the VAF approach was not the subject of this research per se, it is a key element in allowing funded projects and their host organisations to deliver against their objectives and those of the policy areas analysed.

The impact of VAF-funded projects on Scottish Executive policy areas

VAF-funded projects were found to have helped to achieve the objectives of the Scottish Executive in four broad areas:

- Reducing the barriers to volunteering
- The inclusion of people affected by discrimination and inequality
- Promoting social inclusion and the regeneration of communities
- Developing voluntary sector organisational capacity

Reducing the barriers to volunteering

The **Volunteering Strategy** (published in 2004) identified four main strands of work, two of which were especially relevant to the work of VAF:

- Dismantling the barriers to volunteering and closing the opportunity gap
- Improving the volunteering experience

The strategy also identified that a range of groups were typically under-represented among volunteers, including those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, those who are long-term sick, unemployed people and those lacking formal qualifications.

Added to this, a number of groups also face significant additional barriers, including disabled people, people with mental health problems and members of ethnic minority communities.

Among the barriers identified were those facing individuals (including lack of information, confidence or skills), and those facing organisations (including a lack of management skills, policies or access to supervisory staff).

VAF-funded projects made a significant contribution to the achievement of both of these aims of the Volunteering Strategy. The projects operated largely in niche areas, working with both volunteers and clients from groups with which many organisations had traditionally found it difficult to engage.

Among the ways in which projects used VAF funding helped to **dismantle the barriers to volunteering** were:

- Employing innovative approaches, such as changing the mode of delivery of a service to facilitate home-based working, or changing hours to better suit those with children
- Targeting publicity and recruitment towards individuals from excluded groups who may volunteer, but who may be unaware of the options
- Investing (in some cases significant sums) in ensuring that projects were able to provide a suitable environment in which volunteers could operate effectively, and happily. It is worth noting that a significant proportion of the approximately 1500 Valuing Volunteers Grants awarded over the life of the fund were used by projects to address one or more shortcomings in their facilities
- Helping organisations to becoming better organised, have policies in place and, in many cases, employing a volunteer coordinator with a dedicated volunteer support role

There is a clear view from this research that the volunteer coordinator role was critical in the success of many organisations in terms of both recruiting and managing volunteers, as well as indirectly in providing an effective service to clients.

The net effect of these approaches was that most EMGS and UVAF – funded projects were able to recruit volunteers from groups typically excluded from such opportunities. In some cases, VAF support was directed towards facilitating *clients* from these groups to progress to volunteering.

VAF-funded projects have also had a significant impact on **improving the volunteering experience**. Among the many ways this has been addressed are through:

- Effective screening, allocation and supervision policies which allowed volunteers' aspirations to be met, and clients' needs to be addressed
- On-going training, which was provided by virtually all funded projects, and which was strongly promoted as good practice by VAF
- Providing support to volunteers, both from the perspective of mentoring and through the payment of expenses
- Helping other organisations to improve their working practices, not only with volunteers, but also clients (particularly in the area of mental health, disability and work with ethnic minority communities).

At a basic level, VAF encouraged projects to “value volunteers”. VVGS funding was used by more than 1500 projects to provide (among other things) social events, festival-based events, outings and awards ceremonies. One project described it as “being able to say thank you”.

The inclusion of people affected by discrimination and inequality

The Scottish Executive **Equality Strategy** identified three strategic objectives, of which two were especially relevant to VAF-funded projects:

- Making better policy and providing better services
- Promoting equal opportunities and tackling discrimination

Much of the work of VAF-funded projects has been concerned with these objectives, and the process of ensuring that equalities groups are able to play a complete part in social and economic life in Scotland.

The *fact* of the existence of UVAF, EMGS and VVGS represents a significant contribution to the achievement of the policy objectives of the Scottish Executive in relation to a number of equalities issues. EMGS was, at the time of its introduction, the only fund dedicated to tackling racial discrimination, and, throughout the period covered by this research, operated tight eligibility criteria which meant that virtually all of the projects supported were promoted by ethnic minority-led voluntary organisations. The effect of this is that the fund has had a significant impact on the *organisational capacity* of the ethnic minority voluntary sector.

In terms of **making better policy and providing better services**, VAF-funded projects made contributions in a range of areas, including that:

- The majority of EMGS and UVAF projects worked directly with equalities groups, identifying needs and developing services to meet these needs
- Many services were new, and filled identified gaps for typically excluded groups

- A significant proportion of VAF-funded projects made links to public sector service providers and to wider planning partnerships, helping to improve the understanding, and treatment, of equalities groups

VAF-funded projects also made a significant contribution to **promoting equal opportunities and tackling discrimination**, for example through:

- Promoting inclusive volunteering opportunities which led, for many, to employment, further education, or simply a better quality of life
- Opening up volunteering to many people who would previously have faced significant barriers
- Tackling service-related discrimination directly by advocacy and representation, with projects offering many examples of services which had improved as a result of their work or intervention
- Delivering services which, for example, tackled physical access barriers, language and communication barriers, cultural and other barriers

Promoting social inclusion and the regeneration of communities

Over the period covered by this research, there were two linked and complementary Scottish Executive policies, “Closing the Gap”, dealing with community regeneration, and “Closing the Opportunity Gap”, dealing with social inclusion.

Drawn from these policies, there were a number of areas directly of relevant to VAF-funded projects.

“Closing the Gap” focused on two main areas:

- The development of core public services in deprived areas
- Developing social capital

“Closing the Opportunity Gap” focused on six main objectives, of which five were directly relevant to VAF-funded projects:

- Aspects of reducing the risk of, and addressing poverty (three objectives)
- Increasing the health of people living in deprived communities
- Improving access to services for disadvantaged groups

In terms of the **development of core public services in deprived areas**, and the linked “Closing the Gap” objective of **improving access to services**, VAF funding contributed in a range of ways:

- In many cases, VAF-funded projects developed *new* services in areas where the public sector could not, or would not act
- Partnership working has also led to improvements in public services
- Projects helped services to extend their reach into new communities (for example asylum seekers, white minority groups) where they had not previously been available
- Similarly, projects have also acted as bridge between clients and the public sector, improving the flow, and the quality of referrals

- Funded organisations were able to exert influence has been in terms of facilitating consultation by service providers with groups often considered (hard to reach)

VAF-funded projects also made a significant contribution to **developing social capital**, largely through the development of a cohort of volunteers, as:

- A significant proportion of volunteers supported by VAF-funded projects were previously unemployed, long term sick, or affected by low levels of skills
- Projects supported volunteers from typically excluded groups (and clients in a lot of cases) to gain new skills and experience
- Projects, in many cases, empowered service users, for example, in terms of community activism, or at an individual level, to take greater control over their own lives
- A significant number of projects either enhanced existing, or developed new connections to community planning, health and social care planning and other representative structures
- There were many examples of projects where volunteers were supported to become members of representative groups, both benefiting the individual and their community, but also raising the awareness of other members
- Projects worked to raised public awareness of issues facing excluded groups, making it more likely that their needs would be recognised

Although not a direct objective of many projects, both EMGS and UVAF also contributed to **reducing the risk of, and addressing poverty**. For example:

- At a basic level, projects tended to work with people greatly at risk of poverty through either low income, or lack of access to, or information about support. The work of the projects impacted on this directly through helping people to move into work and training, and facilitating access to services which would help address the issues clients (and volunteers) faced
- Some projects targeted groups often otherwise ignored, such as carers
- VAF-funded services were provided free, or at minimal cost
- Projects often addressed the issue directly by providing advice and information

Increasing the health of people living in deprived communities was the primary focus of many VAF-funded projects, particularly through EMGS, and:

- Many of the EMGS projects worked with groups facing additional barriers to accessing health services
- Some UVAF projects also worked to improve the access of, for example, older people and disabled people to health services
- Some of the health projects were particularly successful in building partnerships with NHS and other voluntary sector bodies with a view to improving their practice in working with excluded groups

- There are many examples of both EMGS and VAF-funded projects which, in addressing health issues directly or indirectly, greatly improved the quality of life, for example, of isolated groups (such as older people, or some people from ethnic minority communities) and disabled people

Developing organisational capacity

Arguably the key issue facing the voluntary sector over the period of this research (and currently) is sustainability. For an organisation to be sustainable, two main linked areas required to be addressed:

- Financial security
- Organisational capacity

In terms of **financial security**, VAF funding was considered to have helped organisations in a range of ways, for example:

- VAF provided funding to many new and young organisations, providing a three-year, stable platform on which to build. While this is not unique, three-year pump-priming funding is very unusual
- VAF provided support with many aspects of capacity building (see below) which contributed to projects being better managed, and better able to demonstrate (and articulate) the needs of their clients, and their own impact, hence improving the chance of future funding
- A period of VAF funding was seen by other funders to be “good currency” in that they knew projects would have been exposed to the disciplines of the active monitoring regime described in the first section of this report
- Although funding was for a maximum of three years, VAF provided support to projects to seek other funding and manage the change process

VAF also contributed to **organisational capacity**, as:

- For many projects, VAF was their first external funding, and they were supported to put policies and structures in place (such as committees, minutes, business plans etc)
- VAF helped projects become better organised, particularly in dealing with volunteers (and by extension staff and management committees)
- A wide range of equipment was purchase by projects, including adaptations to allow services and volunteering to be accessible to all
- VAF promoted networking between projects, and more widely
- VAF supported a great deal of training and development for volunteers, staff and management committees

Stakeholders were clear in their view that there had been an overall impact in terms of the capacity *of the sector* to deliver services, particularly to vulnerable groups, especially in the context of EMGS helping to develop a significant extension of the number, and quality of voluntary organisations working within the Scotland’s ethnic minority communities. The significant role of the capacity building grant in helping to stimulate very small organisations, and the benefits brought by VAF’s flexible approach to eligibility were also viewed very positively.

IN CONCLUSION

It is clear that VAF and VAF-funded projects made a significant impact on a number of key Scottish Executive policies over the life of the funds. Although both UVAF and EMGS were rooted in voluntary action, their impact was much wider. In essence, VAF supported volunteers to deliver services to some of the most isolated, vulnerable and excluded groups in Scotland. This meant that VAF funds, in the words of one stakeholder, “punched above its weight”.

VAF also put in place a number of practices which are now commonplace across funders, but which were, at the time, at best, rare. VAF took risks with new projects. It was happy to fund organisations initially lacking advanced structures. It provided support and feedback to projects at all stages, and it operated open, transparent funds which were actively promoted in a way to ensure that they reached the intended client groups. VAF put in place approaches to monitoring which were proportionate and proactive, supported by regular visits from programme managers. VAF also stuck by projects facing difficult periods, and would provide help where it could.

Both UVAF and EMGS were niche funds. In the case of the former, it allowed people who faced significant barriers to become involved in volunteering. In the case of the latter, it was the only dedicated fund directed towards the needs of ethnic minority clients, supporting ethnic minority-led voluntary organisations. VAF was also responsive to change. New eligible groups were added as levels of awareness increased and policies matured. Capacity building funds were introduced to help both smaller organisations not yet ready for “large” grants, and current “large” grant holders to develop new aspects of their work.

The Valuing Volunteers Grant, while not entirely unique was seen by recipients to be a way of saying “thank you” to volunteers, and to fund aspects of their development (including training, exchanges and study visits) that would have been very difficult to fund in any other way.

Finally, it is worth recognising the role of the Scottish Executive Social Inclusion and Voluntary Issues Unit (SIVI –previously known as Voluntary Issues Unit) which awarded VAF the funding to deliver the programmes throughout their life.

While SIVI set the context for the funds, the detail of delivery was by led by VAF with mutual negotiation with SIVI. Importantly, SIVI allowed VAF to develop its approach and to manage the funds in its own way, and thus enabled them to be ‘agents of change’ on the behalf of the Scottish Executive.

“Previously, volunteering has been promoted almost as an end in itself, as an action which is intrinsically good and worthy. While this may be the case, it has been argued that this approach has inadvertently marginalised volunteering. For volunteering to reach its true potential, to rise on the agenda of policy makers, funders, and senior managers, it needs to be seen for what it is: a human resource; a way of getting things done; and as a way of enabling citizens to play an active part in their geographical community or in their community of interest, while satisfying the needs and aspirations of individual volunteers.”

This Summary Report, highlights in brief the research outcomes. For a full copy of the Research Report, please call Susan Connell on 01383 620780. A nominal charge of £5 will payable to cover postage and packing.