

Thriving Communities

This is a summary of the Thriving Communities report, commissioned by Essex Community Foundation (ECF) as part of its community listening project.



About the Community Listening Project

In 2021, ECF commissioned an independent listening project to understand the lived experience of community organisations in Essex: the challenges they face, how they support their communities to thrive, and the role of ECF in contributing to thriving communities. The full report can be found on the ECF website. The Thriving Communities report conveys the experiences of 35 voluntary and community organisations in Essex who took part in the project.

Participating organisations represented the four quadrants of Essex, as well as the unitary authorities of Southend and Thurrock. Their annual income ranged from below £50,000 to over £500,000 and consisted of different organisational structures, including registered charities, community interest companies, and private companies limited by guarantee without share capital. The communities they work with involves children and young people, older adults, ethnic minorities, refugees and asylum seekers, people living with disability and long-term illness, LGBTQIA people, homelessness, victims of crimes, abuse and violence, people with experience of the criminal justice system or at risk of offending, and economic disadvantage.

We also spoke to organisations providing infrastructural support to voluntary and community groups, as well as organisations whose work included arts, culture, heritage and environment. While most participants had been successful in their funding applications to ECF, some had not received financial support.

Discussions covered the challenges community organisations faced, the current funding landscape, the value that funders can offer beyond financial grants and feedback on ECF's existing funding practice. The findings from these discussions formed the Thriving Communities report and the recommendations it makes.

Summary of key findings and recommendations

Thriving communities

- Participants described thriving communities as offering a sense of belonging; systems of support; opportunities for education, employment and wellbeing; resilience; and sustainability. To best support thriving communities, organisations needed a clear mission, good governance, the ability to identify need, co-production, collaboration with other groups, and sufficient resources.
- The role of the funder was considered to extend beyond financial support to include network building, influencing, upskilling and development. ECF was meeting some of these needs, but an appetite remained among participants who felt they could benefit from the local knowledge and funding expertise that ECF held.
- As a place-based funder, ECF demonstrated strength in understanding local need and effectively supporting small, local, and/or grassroots groups who often struggled to obtain funding from elsewhere.
- Many organisations reported strong relationships with ECF that had developed over time, which added value to their experience. Organisations who had not built this type of relationship (often first-time applicants, unsuccessful applicants, or applicants working with marginalised communities) were less clear on how their work met ECF's funding criteria, and less confident in approaching ECF directly for information and advice.
- Challenges in accessing funding, such as unconscious bias and a funder-led agenda, were reflective of the historic power imbalance between funder and grantee. This could have significant consequences for groups working with marginalised communities, in particular.
- Co-production was a valuable tool in ensuring services were effectively meeting need by running with communities as opposed to for communities. Yet a lack of time, resource, or skill set could prevent groups from forming ongoing relationships with their communities, reaching out to marginalised groups, and using community voice to influence decision-making.

- Many organisations relied heavily, if not entirely, upon the contribution of volunteers but some groups in economically disadvantaged areas reported financial pressures within their communities as negatively impacting the ability to volunteer in recent years. This threatened the future of several organisations whose work was likely to reduce, or cease altogether, due to low volunteer numbers.

Based on these findings, the report recommends that:

- ECF's work should be aligned with participants' description of thriving communities for investment to be most effective and, given the lack of alternatives, ECF should prioritise and protect its funding of small and/or grassroots groups which is key to their survival.
- ECF should consider how it can offer support to community groups that extends beyond grantmaking, such as upskilling and development opportunities, while being mindful to avoid duplicating existing provision.
- ECF needs to reflect more on how it achieves equity, diversity and inclusion within its funding practices, and how it builds stronger relationships with groups working with marginalised communities who have been historically overlooked. It must also consider how it builds stronger relationships with first-time, or unsuccessful, applicants who do not benefit from the strong relationship other organisations hold with ECF.
- Ongoing co-production and listening exercises will help to redress the historic power imbalance between funder and grantee and allow ECF to better address the diverse needs of community groups in Essex. ECF can strengthen community voice within organisations by investing in co-production and listening exercises that not only enhance the effectiveness of organisations' work but contribute to a local evidence base.
- As a large investor of the voluntary sector in Essex, ECF should consider how it uses its influence to give a platform to community voice and lived experience that may otherwise not be heard.
- Further exploration is required into the challenges posed by volunteer shortages, as such issues will have implications on much of the work that ECF funds. This should take place in conjunction with groups likely to have an enhanced understanding of the issue such as infrastructural organisations.

The funding landscape

- The current funding landscape presented numerous challenges such as a decline in statutory funding, a funder-led agenda, and an emphasis on short-term project work. This could particularly disadvantage smaller, grassroots groups who were not able to bid for large statutory contracts, or provide projects based on specific issues popular among funders.
- In this tense financial climate, organisations could view one another as competitors, as opposed to colleagues, which discouraged the collaboration that participants identified as crucial to thriving communities. Funders often attempted to mitigate this by incentivising joint applications, but participants felt this only created more problems and instead wanted to collaborate by forming trusting relationships organically, and over time.
- One of ECF's most valuable contributions was regarded as its willingness to provide core funding, which was hard to come by in the general funding landscape. Core costs often accounted for expenses that were less likely to be funded (such as rent and utilities) but were crucial to an organisation's ability to deliver its work.
- Current funding practice focused on short-term project work, meaning organisations were often unable to offer consistency in their services. Multi-year funding was hard to come by, though there was some awareness that ECF funds sometimes provided longer-term funding.

Based on these findings, the report recommends that:

- The experiences of community groups should be used as context for funders, such as ECF, who must decide how they can better support grantees who may be facing financial difficulties because of these barriers.
- ECF should avoid incentivising collaboration by encouraging organisations to submit joint applications and should instead encourage meaningful collaboration by continuing its existing work of bringing organisations together and forming networks.
- ECF must continue to fund the core costs that not only allow organisations to retain the infrastructure vital to the success of their work, but also build in a degree of independence that entrusts groups to make financial decisions based on their expertise of the needs of their communities.
- ECF should also consider how it could expand upon its existing number of multi-year funds, and should also clarify which multi-year funds it offers, and how groups can apply.

Grantmaking

- Applying for funding was seen as a barrier in and of itself due to lengthy and complicated application forms; often disproportionate to the size of funds being awarded. Similarly, reporting back to funders often came with outsized data collection requirements, a focus on quantitative monitoring, and a lack of response to grantees who had submitted their reports.
- Therefore, many organisations praised ECF for using application forms generally considered to be brief and understandable, and providing an option for groups to express an interest in a fund before completing a full-length application. Participants largely felt that ECF set reasonable monitoring requirements, and many appreciated the ability to submit qualitative data such as photographs and case studies.
- Most organisations were enthusiastic about receiving visits from ECF, as these were seen to positively impact the funder-grantee relationship by providing groups with a sense that their work had been acknowledged and understood.
- Participants commended ECF's response to their needs during the COVID-19 pandemic by being flexible, making quick decisions, and reaching out to organisations to ask how they could support them. There was a desire for this flexibility and personability to remain embedded in the grantmaking process going forward, particularly as groups felt the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic would be long-lasting.
- Larger organisations sometimes felt their funding needs had outgrown ECF's offer but were also uncertain about how they could acquire larger funds from other funders. They were also unclear as to if, and when, ECF would stop supporting them as they continued to grow.

- Several misconceptions were held about ECF's funding criteria. For example, some believed ECF did not fund digital work, or that ECF would be abandoning the use of application forms. These misconceptions negatively impacted relationships between funder and grantee, as groups were confused as to whether ECF could, and would, support them.

Based on these findings, the report recommends that:

- It is important for ECF to maintain the brevity and ease of its application and reporting processes, as this is essential in supporting those organisations who are unable to comply with unduly complex and time-consuming requirements that other funders may use.
- While it would not be possible to visit all the organisations ECF supports, careful consideration should be used to decide which organisations would most benefit from visits, such as marginalised groups, who have traditionally been overlooked by funders. Outside of visiting, ECF could begin to build relationships with applicants who are new to them by opening a dialogue when an application is first received.
- ECF should reflect on how it continues to provide support that is flexible and personable in its post-pandemic grantmaking, while remaining alert to the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- It is important for ECF to think about the role it plays for larger organisations in acknowledgement that different sized organisations currently have different experiences of ECF.
- Where misconceptions about ECF's grantmaking currently exist, it will be important to offer communications that clarify the remit of ECF's funds so that groups have a clearer idea on if or not their work qualifies for funding.



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