Evaluation of the Community Facilities and Activities Programme – Research Summary

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Research Summary

Background

The Minister for Social Justice and Regeneration launched the Community Facilities and Activities Programme, known as CFAP, in November 2002. The programme forms part of the Government's strategy to tackle social disadvantage – one of the three major themes in the Welsh Assembly Government's strategic plan, 'Wales: A Better Wales'.

CFAP is a grant scheme to help community and voluntary organisations provide facilities or carry out activities that promote community regeneration. The programme takes a specific approach to tackling social disadvantage by focusing on disadvantage at the community level and by recognising that even the most affluent communities in Wales are likely to have small pockets of deprivation.

In June 2006, the Welsh Assembly Government commissioned an evaluation of the CFAP. The evaluation was based on the need to answer the following questions:

   i.   How effective is the scheme in realising its policy objectives?
   ii.   How efficiently are the scheme's resources allocated?
   iii.   How effective is the system put in place to monitor the outputs and outcomes of individual projects?

Research design and methods

The methods adopted included:

   i.   a review of policy and strategy documents in Wales;
   ii.   a review of programme management literature and data;
   iii.   interviews with key programme management stakeholders;
   iv.   a review of programmes similar to CFAP from across the UK;
   v.   visits to 15 projects supported by the programme (for project selection rationale and criteria see appendix 4); and
   vi.   a comprehensive survey of the stakeholders from 250 project applications.

An important aspect of the research design was undertaking the survey of CFAP projects after the other elements of the research had been undertaken. This allowed the questionnaire and the survey to be designed to focus on issues and matters of interest identified during the previous phases of the evaluation exercise. The response rate to the survey was 21% which is considered to be very favourable.

The main findings of the research are outlined below. A full analysis of the results can be found in appendix three of the main report.

Main Findings

This evaluation of the Community Facilities and Activities Programme (CFAP) found the programme has a significant impact within the local area of each of the projects it supports. The existence of community groups and social structures are, however, clearly important elements in the project development process. Communities, therefore, need a certain level of 'capacity' before they are able to access support from the CFAP. This may explain why some regions in Wales have been more successful that others in terms of accessing funds from the CFAP.

The programme as a whole, its materials and the service provided by Assembly staff is considered to be excellent by a large majority of applicants and beneficiaries. This is largely due to the strong 'customer focus' within the programme which, amongst other things, means that application process is kept as simple as possible and that excellent feedback is provides to applicants.

Demand for funding from the CFAP programme is incredibly high and is growing; far exceeding the resources that are available. This means that around half the applications submitted have to be rejected. It also means that the pressure upon the programme administration team is considerable. Unless additional resource is made available or changes are introduced to the system which controls the number of applications submitted, the CFAP management system will inevitably become unsustainable and should, therefore, be reviewed.

Due to the volume being submitted, the appraisal of applications and the provision of feedback to unsuccessful applicants dominate the activities of the CFAP administration team, often at the expense of other activities. This raises a number of issues. Providing feedback to unsuccessful applicants is clearly important and the time that is spent doing this is one of the reasons why CFAP is so highly regarded. However, there is a fine line between providing constructive feedback to applicants and providing advice and guidance to community groups on the development of projects which can be considered to be a 'capacity building' activity and, therefore, outside the remit of the CFAP which is designed to provide funding to implement projects.

The project appraisal system used is built around the type of projects the programme has been designed to attract; small-scale, community projects. A critical review of the appraisal system has identified a number of possible gaps. However, due to the fact that the majority of project can be considered 'low-risk', this is not necessarily of concern. Any gaps within the system do, however, become apparent when larger or more complex projects are being considered.

There is a growing change in the type of organisations submitting applications for funding which could, potentially, change CFAP from a programme which supports a large number of small, community level, projects to one which

supports larger projects which are likely to have been submitted by professional and community support organisations rather then by community groups themselves. Because the programme is managed on a competitive basis, any increase in the number of projects being submitted by professional organisations could also lead to a reduction in the amount of support that was being provided directly to community groups. The Assembly, therefore, needs to consider whether any action is necessary to maintain the community focus of the programme.

Recommendations

1. Steps should be taken to ensure the programme maintains its focus on supporting community led projects including, potentially, a review of the eligibility of 'professional' organisations to apply for funds from CFAP.

2. The resources allocated to CFAP should be reviewed to ensure the programme continues to effectively support the implementation of communities regeneration projects. Increases in both funding and staffing levels should be considered.

3. If additional funding and/or staff cannot be made available, consideration should be given to introducing mechanisms for controlling the volume of applications being submitted to the programme and for reducing the 'workload' of the administration team.

4. CFAP should maintain its focus on funding the implementation of projects rather than advising communities on the development of projects and submitting an application form.

5. Alternative arrangements for providing in-depth feedback and support to unsuccessful applicants should be considered. For example, advice and guidance could be provided via Assembly funded capacity building programmes and organisations or via a series of workshops.

6. Some targeted capacity building may be appropriate to help those less coherently structured communities to access the CFAP resources including access to 'professional' support. It may, again, be appropriate to deliver this support via Assembly funded capacity building programmes and organisations.

7. Some regions in Wales have been more successful in accessing funds from CFAP than others. The potential to commission further research into the reasons why some regions of Wales have been more successful than others should be considered with a view to exploring whether the success of those regions could be replicated elsewhere.

8. Greater links should be developed with other Assembly departments and with Assembly funded community regeneration programmes and organisations.

9. Projects identified as being 'high-risk' should be subject to more stringent appraisal, monitoring and review by the programme administration team.