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The DCAL Community Festivals Fund Evaluation

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The Community Festivals Fund is provided by DCAL and administered by local councils. Among its primary objectives, it is designed to improve the capacity of community festivals and provide sufficient support to expand the sector and make it less reliant on public funding.

In September 2012, DCAL published an evaluation of the Community Festivals Fund. This paper examines the DCAL evaluation and provides some observations on the methodology applied.

Key Points

- The Community Festivals Fund is provided by DCAL and administered by local councils. Among its primary objectives, it is designed to improve the capacity of community festivals and provide sufficient support to expand the sector and make it less reliant on public funding.
- In September 2012, DCAL published an evaluation of the Community Festivals Fund.
- The evaluation examines the economic impact of community festivals, their potential social effects, and the extent to which any improvements to community relations can be determined. However, in all three areas the evaluation encounters some difficulties in that the objectives of the fund are not themselves clearly specified.
- In economic terms, the methodology employed by the evaluation is problematic in that in seeking to analyse the number of out-of-state visitors, no attempt is made to estimate the numbers for nine council areas (including Belfast) for which data was not available.
- The evaluation concludes that ‘the CFF failed in its objective to make festivals less reliant on public funding’, though this would appear to be based on no sound evidence.
- An attempt is made to measure social benefits, and it is concluded that this can only be done subjectively. However, this conclusion does not take into account a number of well-established methodologies for gauging the social impacts of cultural events.
- A common feature of such methodologies is the gathering of survey evidence from those involved in the festival (attendees, organisers and other stakeholders). It would seem to be a key drawback of the DCAL evaluation that it was not able to draw on such survey evidence.
- In terms of gauging the impact of festivals on community relations, no ready-made toolkit currently exists for the analysis of specific impacts.
- However, future evaluations could make use of emerging attempts to build indicator frameworks for community relations, potentially in combination with specifically tailored surveys to isolate the specific influence of festivals as opposed to ‘background’ social and political improvements.

Executive Summary

The Community Festivals Fund is provided by DCAL and administered by local councils. Among its primary objectives, it is designed to improve the capacity of community festivals and provide sufficient support to expand the sector and make it less reliant on public funding.

In September 2012, the Departmental Economics Unit in DCAL conducted an evaluation of the fund in 2012, the aim of which was 'to examine the extent to which the Fund achieved the aims set for it and to consider the costs and benefits involved'.

In terms of economic impact, the evaluation analyses the distribution of CFF funding across the 26 local council areas, the distribution of funding across different kinds of festivals, and cost-effectiveness indicators employed by individual councils. It also seeks to examine the number of out-of-state visitors, visitor expenditure, and employment.

However, there are two conclusions within the evaluation which the evidence available does not seem to support. Firstly, though a figure is used for the total number of out-of-state visitors, no attempt has been made to estimate the numbers for the nine council areas (including Belfast) for which data was not available.

Also, the conclusion that 'the CFF failed in its objective to make festivals less reliant on public funding' appears to be based on no sound evidence. The lack of data and the different practices of different councils in reality make it difficult, if not impossible, to draw any conclusion on the issue of sustainability.

The attempt to measure social benefits, in Section 6.1 of the report, also looks to be methodologically problematic. The use of festival location 'as a proxy of all participants in the festival' is questionable.

In terms of attempts to measure the social impact of community festivals, the evaluation concludes that this can only be measured subjectively, and that it is 'difficult to measure the extent to which it has been achieved'. The evaluation concludes that it is a 'pitfall' to have an objective aimed at 'enabling community organisations to celebrate their cultural identity and to strengthen community relations' in that this cannot be measured objectively.

However, techniques for evaluating the social impact of cultural offerings, including community festivals, are now relatively well developed. For example, three different forms of study are highlighted in this paper, each using survey techniques employing specifically-tailored questionnaires and interview sessions.

In terms of gauging the impact of festivals on community relations, no ready-made toolkit yet exists for the analysis of specific impacts. However, some attempts have been made to suggest an indicator framework for gauging changes in community

relations which could be considered in future analyses. The evaluation is right to conclude that on the basis of current studies it would be difficult to determine whether any changes or improvements may be directly attributed to community festivals and would not have occurred anyway. However, this issue could potentially be addressed through the use of specifically tailored surveys.

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1 The DCAL evaluation of the Community Festivals Fund

The Community Festivals Fund began in 2006 and was initially sponsored by both DCAL and DSD, and administered by the Northern Ireland Events Company. After 2007 the fund was sponsored by DCAL alone, and responsibility for administering awards was transferred to local councils. Between 2008/09 and 2010/11 CFF awarded £2.77m and supported over 1,100 events.

The Policy and Guidance Framework which accompanies the fund defines a community festival as,

...a series of events with a common theme and delivered within a defined time period. It is developed from within a community and should celebrate and positively promote what the community represents¹.

The Departmental Economics Unit in DCAL conducted an evaluation of the fund in 2012, intending ‘to examine the extent to which the Fund achieved the aims set for it and to consider the costs and benefits involved’².

The period covered by this evaluation is 2008/09 to 2010/11, with specific annual evaluations for each year also available from the DCAL website.³

2 Economic impact

In terms of economic impact, the evaluation analyses the distribution of CFF funding across the 26 local council areas, the distribution of funding across different kinds of festivals, and cost-effectiveness indicators employed by individual councils. It also seeks to examine the number of out-of-state visitors, visitor expenditure, and employment.

However, there are two conclusions within the evaluation which the evidence available does not seem to support. Firstly, the statement that ‘there were approximately 59,000 out-of-state visitors’ under the summary of findings⁴ is potentially misleading as no attempt has been made to estimate the numbers for the nine council areas (including Belfast) for which data was not available (though it is acknowledged in paragraph 6.2.4 that the true total is likely to be understated).

This point is not made clear in the summary. Based on the information available, it would be fair to say that the likely number of out-of-state visitors in 2010/11 was in excess of 100,000, as opposed to the 59,178 stated in the evaluation.

Also, the conclusion that ‘the CFF failed in its objective to make festivals less reliant on public funding’ appears to be based on no sound evidence. Paragraph 4.2.9 rightly

¹ DCAL. 2012. *Evaluation of the Community Festivals Fund (CFF), 2008/09 to 2010/11*: paragraph 1.1.3.

² DCAL. Written briefing for the CAL Committee, September 2012: *Evaluation of the Community Festivals Fund*.

³ DCAL. ‘Community Festivals Fund’: <http://nia1.me/19f> Consulted on 3.1.13.

⁴ As above: paragraph 7.1.27.

concludes that 'the data is fairly inconclusive as to whether festivals have become more or less sustainable'. Contrary to the conclusion above, the findings in paragraph 4.2.4 suggest that 'festivals have become more sustainable'.

The lack of data and the different practices of different councils in reality make it difficult, if not impossible, to draw any conclusion on the issue of sustainability.

The attempt to measure social benefits, in Section 6.1 of the report, also looks to be methodologically problematic. The use of festival location 'as a proxy of all participants in the festival' on the grounds that 'it is fair to assume that the majority of festivals will be primarily attended by people from that local community'⁵ seems problematic, particularly as only 48% of festivals were categorised as 'local festivals'⁶.

3 Social impact

3.1 The DCAL approach

The Community Festivals Fund Evaluation states that one of its terms of reference was to,

Assess both the monetary and non-monetary benefits of the project/programme and compare these against expected benefits.

Some numerical techniques are employed to assess social impact, though these are not without drawbacks. For example, total festival attendance is indicated, though such numbers tend to focus on the festival itself rather than its impact on the host society.

Furthermore, festival organisers themselves were asked to indicate using a scoring mechanism the extent to which community relationships had been improved by their festival. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the scores attributed were generally high and may not be a reliable indicator.

An attempt is made to analyse the location of each festival in relation to areas of multiple deprivation. However, determining the actual location of each festival appears to have been problematic as, in some cases, the postcode of the festival organiser has been used rather than the festival itself. This may be misleading. Furthermore, as indicated above, assuming that most festival participants will be from the local area, without specific evidence to indicate this, may not be reliable.

Indeed it is recognised further on in the evaluation report that 'there are much wider social benefits' to community festivals beyond the economic gain which may or may not result from them, including 'bringing people together' in a way which may encourage 'community cohesion and a sense of belonging'.

⁵ DCAL. 2012. *Evaluation of the Community Festivals Fund (CFF), 2008/09 to 2010/11*: paragraph 6.1.2.

⁶ As above: paragraph 7.1.7.

It is also stated in the evaluation that assessing the wider social benefits of community festivals ‘can only be measured subjectively’ and it is therefore ‘difficult to measure the extent to which it has been achieved’. The report uses case studies to conclude that ‘there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the objective has been met, at least partially’.

The evaluation concludes that it is a ‘pitfall’ to have an objective aimed at ‘enabling community organisations to celebrate their cultural identity and to strengthen community relations’ in that it cannot be measured objectively. However, techniques for evaluating the social impact of cultural offerings, including community festivals, are now relatively well developed.

3.2 Other methodologies for measuring social impact

The following table provides some examples of evaluation techniques for cultural offerings, including brief descriptions of the methodologies adopted in each case.

Reference	Summary
Maughan, C & Bianchini, F. 2004. <i>The Economic and Social Impact of Cultural Festivals in the East Midlands of England</i> . Arts Council England and East Midlands Development Agency: http://nia1.me/199	This assessment considered the economic and social impact of a range of eleven festivals across the east midlands of England. De Montfort University assessed the impact of these festivals through extensive questionnaire surveys of audiences, participating artists, local businesses, local councils and the relevant tourist authorities. The questionnaires were accompanied by participant observation to help with both the design of the questions and the contextualisation of the results. The surveys and observation exercises were designed to ascertain detailed audience profiles, to gauge participants’ attitudes towards the place in which the festival took place and how this may have changed, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the specific approaches adopted by each festival. For stakeholders, both pre- and post-event surveys were conducted.
Haydon, J. 2007. <i>Indigenous Community Festivals – Top End: An evaluation using Encore event evaluation kit</i> . CRC for Sustainable Tourism Pty Ltd: http://nia1.me/198	This evaluation examined the contribution made by various indigenous community festivals in the Australian Northern Territories. It used an ‘off-the-shelf’ evaluation toolkit provided by a specialist company. The study was largely questionnaire based, with volunteers recruited to approach attendees at various festivals in the Northern Territories. The questionnaires were intended to ‘identify and quantify the benefits’ of each festival, and to ‘assist with improvements for future festivals’.
Graham, M. 2008. <i>Impacts on Communities</i> . Museums Galleries Scotland: pp56-8: http://nia1.me/19d	In this example from the heritage sector, Museums Galleries Scotland sought to assess the various strengths of a museum’s community role. A tool was applied which uses a 1 to 5 ranking to assess how those who engage with a museum (including tourists, the local community and specialists). Various criteria were used with interviewees asked how well the museum performed as a visitor attraction, as a catalyst for change, as a centre for creativity, as a story teller and so on. This tool also allows for measurements to be compared and monitored over an extended period of time.

Table 1: Summary of some different approaches to measuring social impact

A core element in each of these studies was the gathering of survey evidence from those involved in the festival (attendees, organisers and other stakeholders). It would

seem to be a key drawback of the DCAL evaluation that it was not able to draw on such survey evidence.

One event evaluation specialist has written that there is a 'growing recognition by the arts and events sectors that more substantial benefits can be demonstrated through the inclusion of social impacts within service evaluation frameworks'⁷.

However, although the CFF evaluation's final recommendations state that 'outcomes and benefits should be more closely monitored', no methodologies for a more thorough assessment of the social impact of any festival funded by CFF are recommended for the future.

There may be a danger that without clear objectives, the evaluation of events such as community festivals also suffers, 'leaving evaluation to the basics of attendance counts, questionable economic impact measures, and assessment of the functional aspects of the event'⁸.

3.3 Methodologies for gauging impact on community relations

Among the eight criteria which festival organisers must satisfy, as set out in the 2007 *Policy and Guidance Framework*, is that their proposed event 'promotes social inclusion and improves community relations'⁹.

The DCAL evaluation uses two methods of examining the extent to which community relations have been improved: anecdotal evidence from monitoring returns, and specific examples of inter-cultural festivals. Using these forms of evidence, the evaluation states that,

In conclusion, although the evidence is anecdotal in nature, there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the objective has been met, at least partially¹⁰.

However, the evaluation goes on to state that,

What cannot be determined is the extent to how much this would have been achieved in the absence of CFF funding – for instance, it is unclear by how much community relations have improved since the CFF was introduced (indeed, they may have been improving without the help of CFF). This highlights the pitfalls of having objectives which can only be measured subjectively...

⁷ Wood, E. (2009) An Impact Evaluation Framework: Local Government Community Festivals. *Event Management*, 12 (3-4), pp.171-185; p173: <http://nia1.me/19b>

⁸ As above: p175: <http://nia1.me/19b>

⁹ DCAL. 2007. Community Festivals Fund: Policy and Guidance Framework: <http://nia1.me/19e>

¹⁰ DCAL. 2012. *Evaluation of the Community Festivals Fund (CFF), 2008/09 to 2010/11*: paragraph 4.4.3.

Neither the Community Festivals Fund itself, nor the study which produced its evaluation document, appear to have employed emerging guidance for assessing impact on community relations.

In 2007, a baseline report was published which provided a set of indicators against which good relations could be monitored in Northern Ireland¹¹.

More recently, a further attempt was made in 2012 to suggest an indicator framework for gauging changes in community relations.¹²

So although no ready-made toolkit yet exists for the analysis of specific impacts by community festivals on community relations, existing publications suggest categories of information which might be gathered in an attempt to analyse relations in a reasonably objective fashion.

These include factors such as crime and security, political progress, educational achievement, and cohesion and sharing, each measured through both qualitative studies as well as quantitative data such as attitudinal surveys and crime statistics.

From these, it seems feasible that some kind of framework could be compiled, thereby deepening the informative but relatively subjective use of self-composed returns made by the festival organisers themselves.

While it would be challenging to determine the extent to which the community festival itself had created any change in community relations – a point acknowledged in the DCAL evaluation¹³ – this issue could potentially be addressed through the use of specifically tailored surveys of the kind referred to in section 3.2 above.

¹¹ Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister & the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. 2007. *A Shared Future and Racial Equality Indicators Baseline Report*. <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/good-relations-report.pdf>

¹² Nolan, P. 2012. *Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report. Number One*. Community Relations Council: <http://www.community-relations.org.uk/about-us/press-releases/item/221/peace-monitoring-report/>

¹³ DCAL. 2012. *Evaluation of the Community Festivals Fund (CFF), 2008/09 to 2010/11*: paragraph 4.4.3.