

Review of the Culture and Heritage Programme

For the Northern Rock Foundation



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For the Northern Rock Foundation, February 2014

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1. Summary

Between 2003 and 2010 the Northern Rock Foundation provided just over £18 million in funding, supporting 185 organisations to deliver 278 projects across the North East and Cumbria through its Aspiration and Culture and Heritage programme grants.

On average around £2.5 million was allocated each year. Between 2005-2006, this increased to a high point of over £3 million per year and in 2008-2009 total funding reduced to just over £2 million. Key activities supported through the grant funding include project/programme development, support for an event/festival, support to employ a new member of staff, help towards core running costs or support for exhibitions.

It is rare to obtain such clear and unambiguously positive feedback in an evaluation such as this. However, the opinion of beneficiaries and stakeholders on the fund across the board is that it had a huge regional impact, raising the profile of the region's cultural offer and creating greater optimism and ambition.

Whilst the scale of funding available was an important factor in pursuing the longer term outcomes, the flexibility of the grant programme and the independence of the Foundation from a national set of objectives were arguably more important in terms of enabling the Foundation to target support. Invaluable in this context was the Foundation's strong sense of place and understanding of the region and the personal presence of its dedicated, professional and passionate staff.

The key factors that supported the success of the programme are:

- **Flexibility of funding and lack of 'instrumentalism'** - trusting applicants to develop and deliver high quality projects, using open measures of progress that enable the creative process, as opposed to very specific measures that often constrict it.
- **Organisational culture and approach** - of NRF as an organisation and individual employees, a personalised approach from people who had real empathy for what the [funded] organisation was trying to achieve or explore.
- **Understanding of the local area and ecology** – a strong sense of place combined with a knowledge and awareness of local nuances and the balance of urban/rural arts practice.
- **Independence of decision-making and process** - acting as a confident (but not arrogant) investor, with the desire to collaborate rather than influence; and, recognising that whilst funding enables, ultimately the [funded] organisation is responsible for the outcome.
- **Scale and level of funding and investment** – raising ambition by providing the freedom to be experimental and take risks, to develop large(r) projects and initiatives, and over sufficiently long time periods to see and learn from outcomes.

The programme's legacy is clearly characterised by the mutual trust and respect that existed (and still remains) between the Foundation and funded organisations. This was a crucial factor in developing the kind of close and collaborative working relationships that enabled successful experimental work. This implicit trust formed the cornerstone of the funding arrangement, alongside flexibility and ambition and is the key underpinning factor that other funders should place at the core of their programmes.

2. Introduction

The Northern Rock Foundation was formed in 1997 with the aim of tackling disadvantage and improving the quality of life in the North East and Cumbria. To achieve this, the Foundation invests money, time and expertise in charitable activities using several tools including grants, loans, training, research and demonstration work. Since 1997, the Foundation has awarded over 2,000 projects which seek to support disadvantaged people on the margins of communities.

In 2003, the Foundation identified a gap in support for the cultural sector and decided to invest in high quality cultural initiatives, and to foster opportunities for emerging artists to stay in the region. More instrumental activities were already supported through other Foundation programmes. In 2006, the Culture and Heritage Programme was formally developed to support cultural activities, audience development and outreach programmes in the fields of:

- Performing arts
- Contemporary craft,
- Design and new media
- Museum and heritage exhibitions
- Festivals and collaborations

Charitable organisations developing and promoting regional talent and professional training schemes in technical theatre work, traditional heritage work and emerging cultural managers were also supported through this programme.

In total, 278 grants totalling just over £18 million were awarded under the Aspiration and Culture and Heritage programmes from 2003 to 2010. However, in response to changing regional circumstances, including the impact of the recession and a need to refocus funding programmes on homelessness and financial exclusion, applications to the Culture and Heritage programme were closed in 2009. Final grants were awarded in 2010 and all of the funded projects came to an end in 2013.

2.1 Aims and objectives

At the close of the Culture and Heritage and Aspiration programmes, the Foundation's Trustees are keen to understand the long-term impacts of the funding provided and capture any learning points to share with other funders. The overall aims of this study therefore include:

The key questions addressed in the study are:

- How did the Culture and Heritage programme develop?
- What were the range and types of projects supported by the Foundation?
- What have been the long term impacts of the Foundation's support for Culture and Heritage organisations in the North East and Cumbria?
- What lessons emerged from the work of the programme that would be helpful to other funders and decision makers?

In addition to addressing these specific research aims, this study also seeks to effectively communicate a clear picture of any additional impact from the funding. The case studies developed as part of this work therefore consider the factors that have driven success or failure in order to capture and share key learning points.

2.2 Methodology

The project involved the following main stages:

- A detailed review of the grant programmes supported as part of the Aspiration and Culture and Heritage Programme.
- A review of the literature and documents surrounding the project's aims and objectives.
- Five in-depth consultations with Foundation staff and key stakeholders (including Local Authorities, key cultural venues across the region, NewcastleGateshead Initiative and former Arts Council England North East staff) to understand in more detail the development of the programme and the impacts of the funding on the region.
- Twelve in-depth consultations with a broad range of funding recipients in order to assess the impacts of the funding on their organisation, community, sector, wider impacts and lessons learned.
- Detailed analysis of the findings, drawing together key outcomes, long-term impacts and lessons learned.

The in-depth interviews covered the whole of the North East and Cumbria.

2.3 Structure of this document

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

- **Section 3** provides an outline of the programme's development in the context of wider challenges (such as the recession).
- **Section 4** considers the type and range of projects supported throughout the lifetime of the programme.
- **Section 5** presents an analysis of the programme impacts, drawing on in-depth interview findings and focussing on organisational impact, community impact and regional impacts.
- **Section 6** presents a summary of the factors that supported the success of the programme, drawn from the stakeholder and project consultations.
- **Section 5** presents the key conclusions and learning points.

Quotations from interviews are provided in the document, referenced as follows:

- Beneficiaries - Interviewee name, organisation, area coverage of grant
- Stakeholders and staff (past or present) - Interviewee name, organisation

3. Programme Development

The Foundation's governing ambition towards the investments made as part of the Aspiration and Culture and Heritage programmes is summed up in the following quote:

"We believe that the people who live in, and visit, our region deserve the best experience possible."

(Penny Vowles, Northern Rock Foundation).

The Foundation places the importance of quality, experience, and locality against a clear belief that the North East and Cumbria should not suffer poorer access and exposure to high quality arts and culture simply because of its geography or recent regional policy.

When we look back at the past ten to fifteen years, even at a time in early 2014 where the region still faces relative economic and social challenges, it is difficult perhaps to comprehend the significant change in ambition, outlook, and assets that the region experienced as a result of marked investment (at different levels in arts and culture and from different agencies) since the 1990s. Today, as an example, Newcastle and Gateshead can be justifiably talked about in the following terms:

"..the hipster capital of the northeast, a cool urban centre that knows how to take care of itself and anyone else who comes to visit with an unexpected mix of culture, heritage and sophistication, best exemplified ... by its excellent new art galleries and magnificent concert hall..."

(Lonely Planet Great Britain guidebook listing for Newcastle upon Tyne).

The region, of course, should not just be defined simply by its 'urban coolness', though the physical fabric borne of cultural regeneration can be difficult to ignore. The Foundation recognised that supporting local impact, in often harder to reach or less accessible places, should be just as important. For example, support was provided for a range of organisations working in rural areas with their respective festivals, exhibitions and performances often generating national media attention and contributing to visitors to the region.

Naturally given the length of the programme, the period in which the Aspiration and Culture & Heritage programmes operated, saw various changes in terms of policy, both regional and national. Whilst programme development considered existing policy, the Foundation didn't necessarily develop its investment approach in direct alignment with it. However, it is also clear that programme of investment did not occur in a vacuum; it was shaped by what was happening locally and what others were doing, rather than led by it:

"It [NRF] seemed to be really strong in terms of analysing strengths and weaknesses and then deploying funding to address the weaknesses and enhance the strengths [...] it didn't go off on a tangent with a particular agenda."

(Andrew Rothwell, Newcastle City Council)

This approach was deliberate. Following an initial period of wariness as it commenced its support of the sector as a major funder, the Foundation naturally sought to ensure its own independence in decision making. Crucially, this was not to the detriment of its typically strong relationship with other funders. The Foundation sought to be a listening organisation, taking care to be mindful of other funders and how and where they invested, but nevertheless to operate in a manner which enabled it to determine its own priorities.

"We wanted to be different from the Arts Council – we didn't want to be politically influenced.... [Our funding was about] quality thresholds. Others wanted arts funding to be a means to an end. [The Foundation was] a thoughtful funder of non-instrumental art."

(Fiona Ellis, independent consultant – ex-Director, Northern Rock Foundation).

"The Foundation had the opportunity to be flexible and fleet of foot. There weren't too many conditions of the support, unlike other funders. [It was about] the flexibility to add money where it was needed... to give wriggle room to recipients... I'd use the word 'transformational'. The title of the fund – Aspiration – [captures it]. It's using the money to make a difference."

(Carol Bell, Newcastle Gateshead Initiative, ex-Programme Manager, Northern Rock Foundation).

The Foundation's approach from the start has been one of confidence and self-belief, with trustees and officers readily understanding the opportunity to add to and improve the profile of the region and to invest in the artform and the artist. The value of the arts was understood, indeed was embraced and celebrated, something that clearly grew stronger as the programme matured.

"[The Foundation] didn't have a theory of change – it wasn't like that... [we felt that] ... a good grant was one that fulfilled its own objectives in its application."

(Fiona Ellis, independent consultant – ex-Director, Northern Rock Foundation).

The overall programme of investment did not change significantly over time, with funding capacity growing into the mid-2000s as profits rose at the Northern Rock. Continuity of approach and consistency in application appear to have been important for all concerned – Foundation trustees and staff, other funders, and the sector itself.

In this context, the Northern Rock bank crisis in 2007 came as a shock, with events developing rapidly at a macro-economy level. The bank nationalisation ended the covenant requiring Northern Rock to remit a share of profits to the Foundation. Instead, for the three years thereafter the Foundation received an annual £15 million payment from Northern Rock with the Foundation's shares cancelled. With the Foundation receiving less income itself, the trustees brought the Aspiration and Culture & Heritage programme to an end.

"They got less ambitious as the years went, especially post-crash. There was less risk-taking and less boldness... The Northern Rock Writers funding was a big, splashy statement in 2005, but later on I don't think they would have done that – there was a reigning back in terms of that cultural ambition. Maybe there was a feeling that they needed to focus on smaller local outcomes. [There was] a sense of them nearing the exit, stepping away from culture to support other things. [However] the Foundation should be congratulated on what they did – they didn't have to do culture to the scale they did. It's a shame it hasn't continued but I recognise the constraints."

(Mark Robinson, Thinking Practice – ex-Executive Director, Arts Council England North East).

As later sections illustrate clearly, the Foundation's exit from a dedicated investment programme, has been keenly felt, with many commenting on their sadness that there isn't such an investor and champion available to the region now.

4. Projects Supported

Between 2003 and 2010, Northern Rock Foundation provided just over £18 million in funding, supporting 185 organisations to deliver 278 projects across the North East and Cumbria through its Aspiration and Culture and Heritage programme grants. A small proportion of grant money (less than 10%) was given to organisations based outside of the region. However this funding supported either the training of individuals from the North East and Cumbria¹, or for national organisations to undertake a programme of events/programmes in the region².

The geographical areas served by the funded projects are shown in Table 1 below. This table demonstrates projects covering the whole of the North East or Tyne and Wear were the most likely recipients of funding. This is perhaps to be expected given the concentration of organisations in Newcastle, Gateshead and Sunderland. Although Cumbria received the third largest proportion of total funds, the average project value in the area was second lowest. Durham and Tees Valley received the smallest share.

Table 1: Areas served by grant funding

Area served	Percentage of funding	Total value of funds	Number of projects	Average project value
Tyne & Wear	32%	£5,717,380	63	£90,752
Northumberland	9%	£1,625,075	27	£60,188
Tees Valley	6%	£1,127,492	19	£59,342
Durham	5%	£838,503	17	£49,324
North East (region as a whole)	32%	£5,759,769	98	£58,773
Cumbria	16%	£2,932,847	54	£54,312
Total (North East & Cumbria)	100%	£18,001,066	278	£64,752

Source: TBR analysis of NRF grants database (TBR ref: W01/S2).

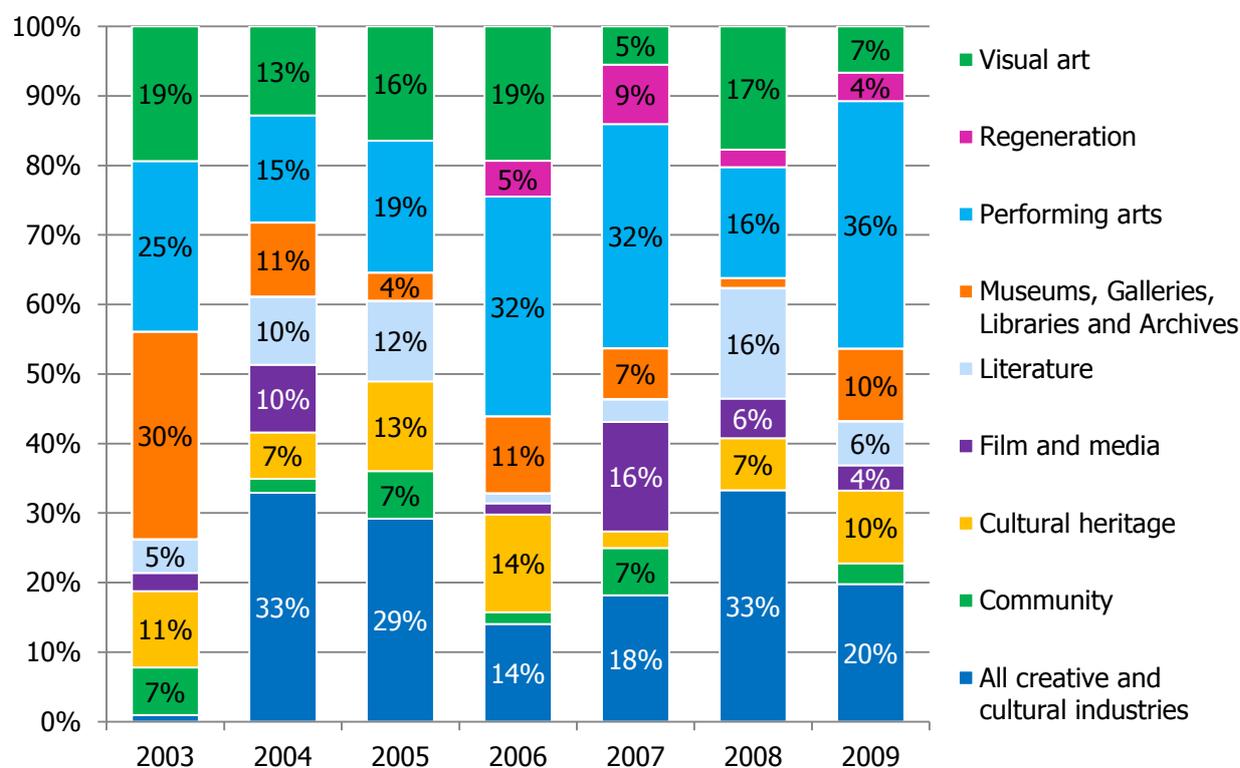
4.1 Type of organisation supported

A number of different sub-sectors within culture and heritage have been supported through the grant programmes, including performing arts (23% of grant funding), the creative and cultural industries as a whole (i.e. development organisations for combined arts - 16%), museums, galleries, libraries and archives (16%), visual art (15%) and cultural heritage (including conservation, historic sites and heritage organisations - 12%). Figure 1 (below) shows this trend was similar throughout the lifetime of the programme. Support for regeneration programmes and performing arts however grew from 2006 onwards and support for museums, galleries, libraries and archives reduced (although this is likely to be linked to the provision of external funding provided at the time by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) and the Arts Council England (ACE)).

¹ For example the cost of fees for creative practitioners to undertake Leadership training with the Clore Leadership Programme.

² For example The Shakespeare Schools Festival, a programme of events ran by Opera North (based in Leeds) or Art Circuit Touring Exhibitions.

Figure 1: Sub-sectors/type of organisation supported (% of total funding provided in a particular year)



Source: TBR analysis of NRF Grants Database (2013), (TBR ref: W01/C4).

The grant programmes also supported a range of different types of organisation, primarily including cultural/heritage venues (e.g. museum/theatre/historic site - 26%), development organisations (23%), events/festivals (14%), touring exhibitions/production companies (13%) and community organisations (7%).

4.2 Activities supported

Key activities supported through the grant funding include project/programme development, support for an event/festival, support to employ a new member of staff, help towards core running costs or support for exhibitions (as shown in Table 2 below).

Activities supporting project/programme development on average received the largest funding awards, and support for productions, exhibitions, events and festivals received the greatest number of awards, reflecting the ambition of the foundation to support a higher level of participation and awareness of arts and culture in the North East and Cumbria.

The Foundation's funding also played a key role in supporting creative/professional development in the region and in marketing and promoting the region's talent; 6% and 4% respectively of the total value of funding has directly supported such activity. Additionally a number of the events and festivals provided activities which supported both marketing and skills development for the region's cultural and heritage sectors.

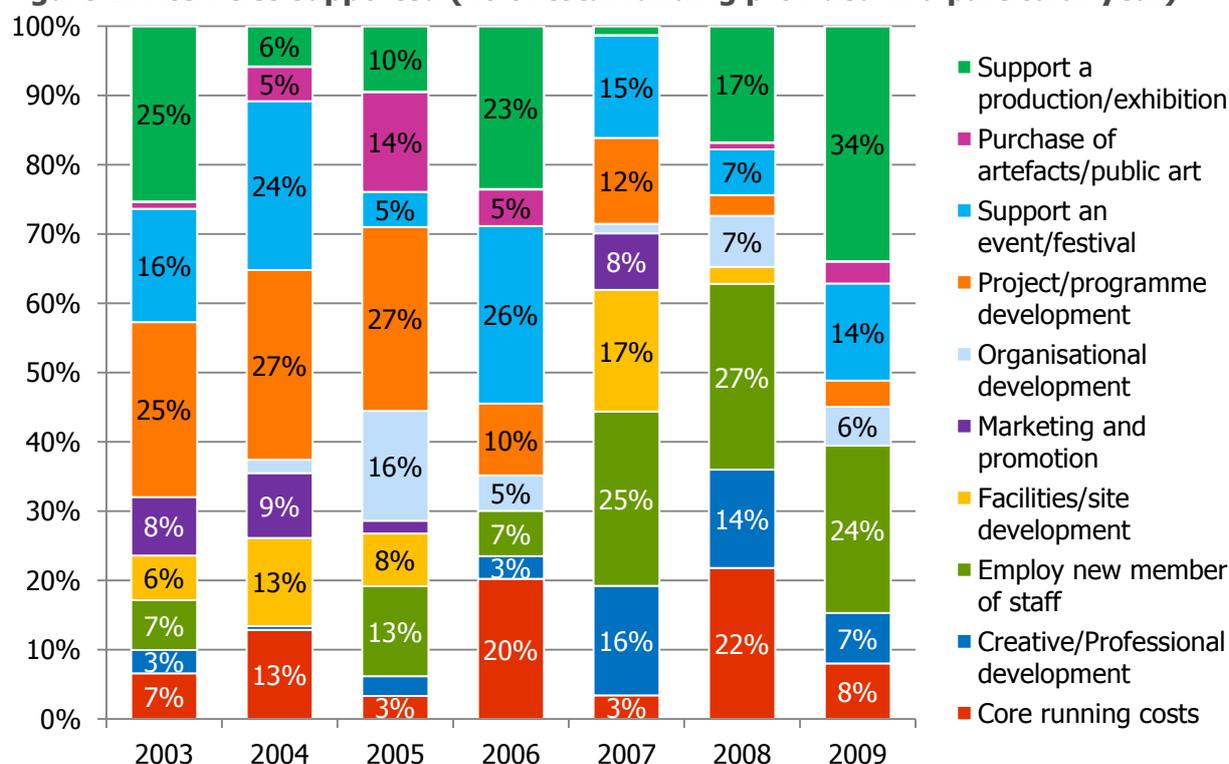
Table 2: Activities supported

Purpose of grant	Grant Value	Percentage of Value	Total number of projects	Average project value
Project/programme development	£2,936,531	16%	22	£133,479
Support a production/exhibition	£2,909,436	16%	47	£61,903
Support an event/festival	£2,818,098	16%	79	£35,672
Employ new member of staff	£2,460,722	14%	32	£76,898
Core running costs	£1,943,088	11%	21	£92,528
Facilities/site development	£1,232,665	7%	20	£61,633
Creative/Professional development	£1,125,775	6%	17	£66,222
Organisational development	£997,126	6%	13	£76,702
Purchase of artefacts/public art	£852,395	5%	15	£56,826
Marketing and promotion	£725,230	4%	12	£60,436
Total	£18,001,066	100%	278	£64,752

Source: TBR analysis of NRF Grants Database (2013), (TBR ref: W01/S6).

While the top 5 activities listed in Figure 2 (below) feature in each year of the programme, the propensity to fund particular activities changed across 2003-2009. For instance, at the outset of the programme (2003-2004), funding for project/programme development, events/festivals and productions/exhibitions accounted for the majority of funding. However, at the close of the programme (2007-2009), key areas included supporting the employment of new staff, creative/professional development, productions/exhibitions and assistance with core running costs.

Figure 2: Activities supported (% of total funding provided in a particular year)

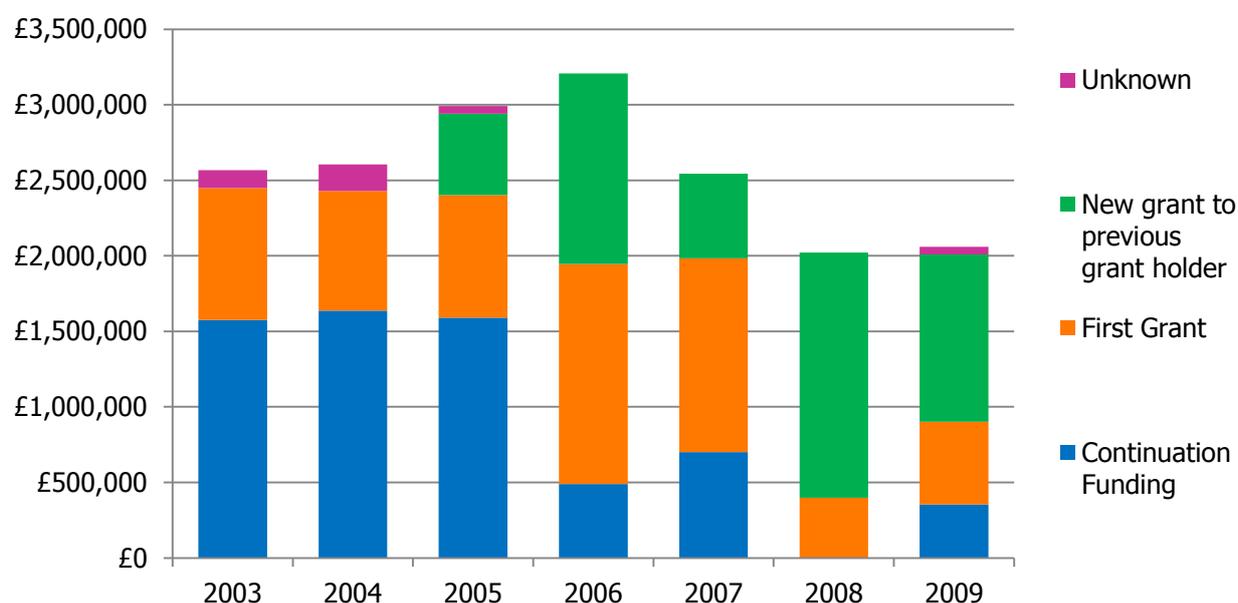


Source: TBR analysis of NRF Grants Database (2013), (TBR ref: W01/C6).

4.3 Money Invested

On average around £2.5 million was allocated each year. Between 2005-2006, this increased to a high point of over £3 million per year and in 2008-2009 total funding reduced to just over £2 million. Across all years, almost half of the grant recipients received only one grant during 2003-2009, 22% received support to continue previous activities and 28% received support for new activities. As Figure 3 below shows, the propensity to provide continuation funding for activities funded prior to the formation of the Aspiration and Culture and Heritage programmes reduced from 2006 onwards. The majority of grants provided from 2006 onwards supported either new activities for previous grant holders, or new activities from previously unsupported organisations.

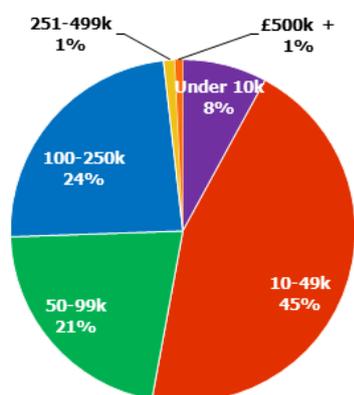
Figure 3: Total funding allocated 2003-2009



Source: TBR analysis of NRF Grants Database (2013), (TBR ref: W01/C11a).

Across both the Aspiration and Culture and Heritage programmes, the majority of grants awarded (53%) were under £50,000. Examples of projects over £250,000 include funding to support a permanent arts project at a Cancer Treatment Centre, activities undertaken by Opera North across the North East and funding to support the Culture 10 programme.

Figure 4: Individual grant value and type of grant provided



Source: TBR analysis of NRF Grants Database (2013), (TBR ref: W01/C11).

5. Programme Impacts

In order to understand the long-term impacts of the Foundation's funding, this section draws together the qualitative findings from in-depth interviews with 12 of the organisations funded through the Northern Rock Foundation and 6 stakeholders from across the North East and Cumbria. In summary:

- The unanimous verdict from the interviewees was that the programme had a huge regional impact. The projects developed from the Foundation's funding helped to raise the profile of culture and heritage in the North East and Cumbria, creating greater optimism and ambition within the region.
- For local communities, the programme encouraged a much greater level of participation in culture and heritage activities, enhanced the creative offer available to local residents, supported local talent development and increased wider interest in the local offer available.
- At the organisational level, interviewees indicated that the funding played a key role in raising the profile and awareness of the organisation, supported experimentation and helped organisations to develop new ways of working.

The following sections provide examples of these impacts at the regional, community and organisational level.

5.1 Regional impacts

Over the course of programme the region benefitted from increased profile and exposure which led to growing optimism, ambition and belief. This marked a step change from prevalent perceptions that went before. The Foundation's support was cited by many interviewees as being pivotal in improving external perceptions of the region, putting organisations and their activities – and their combined contribution to the region's growing cultural excellence – firmly on the map. It also led to a growing desire of artists and cultural professionals based outside of the region to visit, work and collaborate with the region's sector.

"There's no doubt about the impact of NRF funding. The regional offer is broader, the quality better, the skills in the sector higher and there is greater participation in cultural activity."

(Andrew Rothwell, Newcastle City Council)

"Artists would previously feel there was no audience in the North East to bring their work to, but the national profile of the North East's cultural scene is now much stronger and there is more interest in the region following our work and the hub of activity created by the Culture 10 programme during 2005-2009."

(Zoe Bottrell, Culture Creative, Northumberland)

The Foundation's support provided a platform for many local projects to generate publicity and become more valued in their communities and further afield. In turn, this has provided the opportunity for some of the organisations supported to expand their reach to others who may not have previously been aware of the support and expertise available:

"The work carried out by Grizedale Arts has brought an enormous amount of media attention to Coniston, helping us to demonstrate the cultural offer available here."

(Adam Sutherland, Grizedale Arts, Cumbria)

"The funding probably achieved the greatest regional reach that our organisation had ever had at the time, especially so in Cumbria where there is less support and investment."

(Jo Thornton, Generator, North East)

5.2 Local community impacts

Many of the beneficiaries remarked upon the increased local community and engagement as a result of funding, with some showing on-going impact beyond the immediate term of the funding.

"In 2004, we recorded 2,500 visitors and even with a partial closure of the site in 2013 for development, we had 12,000 visitors"

(Audrey Steeley, Heron Corn Mill Beetham Trust, Cumbria)

There have also been examples of projects opening up access to more marginalised communities, leading to opportunities for sharing and learning between cultures and communities and the development of strong practice.

"The funding helped us use the arts in a variety of ways to help people settle in and engage and integrate with local communities.... Audiences have a great time, seeing artists and music they would never normally see, as well as learning about diverse cultures in their local community."

(Rowena Somerville, Tees Valley Arts, Tees Valley)

The overwhelming perception from interviewees was that developing profile and engaging with larger audiences could not have been achieved without the Foundation supporting excellent art and culture. Investing in quality creative outputs and cultural opportunities was central to many (if not all) of the Foundation's investments, trusting the artists and creatives to take risks, to work with others or in new ways, and to help improve their offer. The impact that this encouragement and investment in creativity had was often palpable:

"The Foundation didn't put obstacles in our way. When you get supported to that extent, the positive result of that in the organisation is huge. It's like a huge sigh of relief and you get a new burst of energy. Someone is placing huge confidence in your work."

(Graeme Rigby, Amber, North East)

In many projects, local identity and distinctiveness were key facets of the funding approach, with support being provided to help with local education and talent development, which in turn led to ownership at a local community level. However, the role of the fund in supporting the development of local talent is unique, and greatly valued by the sector.

"Northern Stars – which grew out of Northern Lights – become a massive and unique opportunity for people, given the professional experience and training. The evidence of what (those supported) say to us is that it's pretty life-changing."

(Mark Dobson, Tyneside Cinema, Tyne and Wear)

5.3 Organisational impacts

A clear ambition from the start of the programme was to develop the profile of the region, capitalising on a growing awareness of its cultural offer. With the region benefitting from increased recognition and exposure, this in turn led to opportunities for cultural organisations, with their efforts and activities generating new audience reach:

"We had a season of films on More 4. We were broadcast on BBC 4. There has been lots of touring work in the region. There's been lots of international interest; we've shown at international festivals. Amber has been invited to talk about model on an international basis – there's very strong interest in France as an example. We've screened in Germany, Sweden and the US. People are really amazed about our work from overseas."

(Graeme Rigby, Amber Films, North East)

With greater audience reach, and increased engagement, it was natural that ambition should be cultivated and recognised by the Foundation. Almost without exception interviewees pointed to the fact that they were empowered by the Foundation to think more creatively and encouraged to express this ambition in new programmes of work:

"The funding enabled us to work on a much bigger scale and to reach more people through our work. The funding gave us a huge amount of freedom to develop new ways of working."

(Adam Sutherland, Grizedale Arts, Cumbria)

In some instances, the value and scale of the funding itself provided a necessary boost to outlook and self-confidence. Investments in the artistic and creative practice of both individuals and organisations also provided organisations with the space and freedom to consider and develop new ways of working:

"As an organisation, the collaborative project has been helpful in bringing a renewed focus on the benefits of collaboration with other organisations and the potential to develop this work. The fortieth anniversary work has totally transformed our way of working and has inspired a whole series of new projects, including supporting new artists to develop work for the Edinburgh Festivals."

(Jane Hall, Northern Stage, Tyne & Wear)

Very often, this manifested itself not just in new creative outputs, but also afforded organisations the time and capability to develop work with the aim of securing greater commercial sustainability in the longer term.

"Because of the early work developed through the funded programme of activities, we are now able to develop our projects on a commercial basis. Being able to demonstrate what we could do attracted the interest of an international audience and the Northern Rock Foundation helped us to develop our work overseas. Now we are paid to do similar projects in Asia and Africa and our international fees help to fund our work in the UK."

(Adam Sutherland, Grizedale Arts, Cumbria)

Interviewees also remarked upon what they saw as the timeliness of the support they received from the Foundation, particularly with regards to subsequent organisational development. With the Foundation supporting critical programme development, and allowing organisations to 'flex their creative muscles', the self-confidence this realised in many instances led to organisations being encouraged to engage with other funders. Investment from the Foundation also led to a sense of validation in the work supported by other funders. It may be too far to say that the Foundation's support de-risked subsequent funding in every case, but it is clear that other funders often trusted the judgement of the Foundation when considering their own support.

6. Supporting Factors

None of the organisations interviewed highlighted any specific challenges in terms of working with the Foundation, nor in the formation of the Culture and Heritage grant programmes. Key factors outlined by interviewees as supporting this included:

- The ease of the application and grant development process and the personal support offered by Foundation staff in developing ideas and shaping projects. Interviewees unanimously identified the Foundation staff as being both approachable and highly passionate about the sector, helping to raise ambition and drive success.
- The regional location of the Foundation's offices, making it easy for grant recipients to access support and to arrange face to face meetings. This in particular was felt by interviewees to be helpful in discussing any challenges the projects faced and in refocusing the project's objectives to address these issues where required.
- The specific focus of the funding on the North East and Cumbria and the Foundation's strong understanding of the context of the region was also felt to be significant in helping organisations to develop projects that would have the greatest impact.
- The flexibility of the grant programmes and the independence of the Foundation from a national set of objectives enabled the Foundation to target support where it was most needed. Projects supporting talent development and rural communities in particular benefitted from this focus, as it was felt that these projects received little attention from other funding streams.
- The scale of funding provided by the Foundation was additionally felt to be a unique offer for the region, enabling a number of large scale projects to be carried out by a range of organisations. The scale of this work undoubtedly helped to raise the profile of the region's cultural offer and the loss of this funding has had a notable impact on the ability of organisations to deliver such projects today.

The following sections focus on the findings of the in-depth interviews, drawing out key examples of these supporting factors.

6.1 Approach to support and funding

An overwhelming majority of interviewees reported the ease of application and grant development process as being important in supporting the success of their work. Overall, interviewees considered that the open approach to grant making enabled organisations to develop projects to suit their needs and to generate the greatest impact. The lack of rigid objectives helped a number of participating organisations to develop new ideas and ways of working that would have been difficult to gain funding for elsewhere. The light touch approach adopted in terms of monitoring the grants was also felt to be important in generating a shared trust between the organisations.

"They were interested in you and the work you were doing, it was not about ticking a box. They are client-centred not funding-centred."

(Mark Mulqueen, Room For You, Tyne & Wear)

"The staff had a huge respect for the work carried out by cultural organisations and really trusted organisations to be able to deliver the outcomes."

(Zoe Bottrell, Culture Creative, Northumberland)

The trust developed through this light touch approach proved valuable in fostering good working relationships. A number of interviewees commented on the strong support they received from the Foundation in shaping the focus of their projects and in developing ideas in collaboration. In particular, interviewees suggested that this approach was often different to that of other funding bodies:

"It was really helpful to have a very supportive Programme Manager. They were really engaged with our work and set out really clear expectations. The Programme Manager would often pop in to see the work we produced and see the real impacts on the ground which was great - you wouldn't get that level of involvement with a London based funder."

(Jane Hall, Northern Stage, Tyne & Wear)

"The Northern Rock Foundation didn't really compare at all with other funders because they were so supportive and accessible."

(Jo Thornton, Generator, North East)

In addition to the personal support provided by Foundation staff, the flexibility of the grant schemes enabled the programme to support a broad range of activity across the region. Where interviewees suggested that the majority of other funders have very specific objectives, the Foundation was considered to be unique in its propensity to fund work in new areas.

"The Foundation was a lot more flexible in terms of what it funded and gave a lot more freedom for recipients to develop new ideas. To gain funding from the majority of other funding bodies you have to jump through an unbelievable number of hoops to fit in with their priorities."

(Adam Sutherland, Grizedale Arts, Cumbria)

The flexibility of the objectives of the programme also allowed the Foundation to alter the focus of the funding in response to wider challenges and to target funding appropriately. This flexibility was also considered to be important in responding to changes or challenges experienced at the project level:

"The Foundation was willing to sit and listen and see the value (of what we were doing) and trust us to do good things going forward. Projects sometimes have to change. If you could demonstrate genuine endeavour and learning they let you carry on."

(Mark Dobson, Tyneside Cinema, Tyne & Wear)

6.2 Local focus and knowledge

The location of the Foundation's offices and their independence from a larger, national Foundation was highlighted as a key attribute in terms of the Foundation's understanding of the local context and the accessibility to arrange meetings. In particular, the Foundation's knowledge of the regional context, its history and challenges was considered vital in providing appropriate support.

"National funding bodies have much less of a focus and awareness of the challenges faced by, or the needs of, the North East - they 'don't get it'. The Northern Rock Foundation provided a unique perspective, knowledge and understanding of the region - particularly how things work in rural areas."

(Patric Gilchrist, Theatre by the Lake, Cumbria)

The regional focus of the Foundation's funding was also felt to be important in championing progress within the region. The importance of this focus has become more evident since the close of the programme.

"There is no funding to replace the Northern Rock Foundation's support which is a major blow – other funding bodies are not as interested in local programmes."

(Adam Sutherland, Grizedale Arts, Cumbria)

6.3 Funding amounts

In addition to the regional focus of the funding, the scale of funding offered by the Foundation provided a core resource from which organisations could develop projects on a larger scale. A number of interviewees suggested that this investment was in a completely different league to that of other funding organisations based in the North East and helped to raise the ambition of project objectives.

"Without the Northern Rock Foundation's funding, the collaborative project would have been a much harder ask. Grants provided at the time were usually in the region of £750- £5,000 which would not have supported a project on this scale. We were able to raise our level of ambition and achieve more with a £20,000 grant provided by the Northern Rock Foundation."

(Jane Hall, Northern Stage, Tyne & Wear)

In combination with the aforementioned personal support and the flexibility of grants, the amount of funding provided could also be tailored to suit specific needs. This meant that organisations could often achieve their goals without the requirement of attaining match funding. The ability of projects to operate on a larger scale also helped to raise the profile of events developed as part of the programme.

"It [The Northern Rock Foundation Writers' Award] was a significant investment in literature and a real step change. It was a nationally significant award which would make a true impact on a writer's life, specifically in the North East and Cumbria. At the time it was the largest prize to writers. It was big news in the publishing and literature world. The region became a player nationally and it helped to position New Writing North nationally too. We were able to take our place at tables where we were not previously invited – people started to take us seriously."

(Anna Disley, New Writing North, North East)

7. Concluding remarks and learning points

The organisations interviewed as part of this research reported overwhelming success across projects they secured funding to deliver, whether funding was received in 2003 or 2010. It is rare to obtain such clear and unambiguous positive feedback in an evaluation such as this, clearly indicating that the Northern Rock Foundation was consistent over the course of its funding programmes. The key lessons learned relate to the Foundation's:

- **Flexibility of funding and lack of 'instrumentalism'** - trusting applicants to develop and deliver high quality projects, using open measures of progress that enable the creative process, as opposed to very specific measures that often constrict it.
- **Organisational culture and approach** - of NRF as an organisation and individual employees, a personalised approach from people who had real empathy for what the [funded] organisation was trying to achieve or explore.
- **Understanding of the local area and ecology** - a strong sense of place combined with a knowledge and awareness of local nuances and the balance of urban/rural arts practice.
- **Independence of decision-making and process** - acting as a confident (but not arrogant) investor, with the desire to collaborate rather than influence; and, recognising that whilst funding enables, ultimately the [funded] organisation is responsible for the outcome.
- **Scale and level of funding and investment** – raising ambition by providing the freedom to be experimental and take risks, to develop large(r) projects and initiatives, and over sufficiently long time periods to see and learn from outcomes.

The Foundation has been rightly held up as an exemplar in the manner in which it approached its grant-giving programme. The lack of an instrumental approach ensured that applicants were drawn to a flexible programme. Even following a grant being made, beneficiaries were confident that the Foundation was open to on-going conversations and potential change as activities were delivered. On many occasions, recipients pointed to a refreshing determination that there was a lack of obstacles placed in front of the organisation to deliver on its activities and outcomes. The Foundation was placing the responsibility upon funded organisations to achieve its objectives – in essence, letting the work speak for itself. The Foundation's approach to open measures of progress, rather than very tight objectives, was crucial to this; ensuring that the funding arrangements reflected the creative process and enabled the space to try new and different things.

Much of the positive reaction to the Foundation from beneficiaries is based not on the amount of funding invested, but the empathy and pride that the Foundation's trustees and staff had for the region. This was also clearly embedded in the organisational culture, shared across the team and reflected in the interactions of staff with funded organisations. The outcome of this is that the Foundation was successful in placing confidence in the organisations funded to allow them to explore the most effective approaches to their activities. Funded organisations recognised the importance of having a willing and committed partner, one that was sufficiently engaged and constructive – in order to achieve the best for both parties – without being overbearing.

The Foundation's, commitment to and location in the North East and Cumbria naturally entails a strong local presence and this was a vital part of its success. The ability to interact face-to-face with ease was highly valued by beneficiaries, particularly where projects were experimental and, for many, was crucial to developing a productive working relationship. Indeed, such was

the Foundation's success in this area, a number of beneficiaries remarked upon the difficulty of finding such support from other funders.

The ability of beneficiaries to conceive of and consider experimental projects, was clearly a function of the ambitions that the Foundation set for the programme of funding and the environment it created to enable work of this nature. The willingness to experiment, to take risks, could only truly come from a commonly shared deep understanding of the region, its situation, and the opportunities it could present to help drive change.

Both stakeholders and beneficiaries stated that they believed the Foundation played a critical role in establishing its credentials as an independent funder, judging applications and funding opportunities on their own merit and against their criteria. They did so with awareness of other funders operating in the region, and sometimes complementary to them, but they were not a follower of other funding, trusting their own judgment and rationale for support. A key manifestation of this independence was the clear recognition that the role of funding was to enable beneficiaries to deliver and that ultimately it is the funded organisation that is responsible for the outcome, not the funder.

To achieve such independence it is clear that the Board Members and the staff developed an increasing awareness of their respective roles as a significant and valued funder. As a Trust, the Foundation naturally understood that it had the legal framework to operate independently, but they did not merely pay lip-service to this, actively developing their position and role over the course of the programmes and learning from experience. This independence created a richer environment for more diverse thinking and funding approaches which, in broad terms, can be said to have strongly co-existed with other funders and their strategies.

The Foundation recognised from the outset that if it was to be successful and to leave a legacy, its programmes of funding would benefit from sufficient duration and scale. During the mid-2000s and benefitting from increasing income covenanted from the Northern Rock bank, the Foundation grew into its position. Recipients consistently remarked upon the fact that the Foundation's investments were often over a sufficient period of time, and of sufficient value, to provide organisations with the incentive and opportunity to realise both more sustainable operations going forward as well as, critically, to take a longer view and drive higher ambition – both for the funded organisation itself, as well as the region or locality. The evaluation found evidence from a number of recipients where the funding provided was deemed to be what was right for the project, as opposed to being the least a funder could get away with.

Whilst it can be argued that in any investment there is risk and 'the unknown', the Foundation nevertheless had the confidence to back its judgement and the confidence of others. This very often provided the stimulus for the development of new services and cultural offers that have had a material effect on local employment. Funding also supported some organisation's to diversify or consider and exploit or develop their assets in innovative ways, thereby improving resilience and sustainability longer term. The product of this is a region that stands more confidently on its own two feet, with a high quality cultural offer that retains and attracts talent.

Combining self-determination with a clear understanding of what makes a locality tick, and clarity on how what you can do can make a quantifiable and, this case, unique difference, is arguably the most compelling feature that other funders can learn from.