Executive summary

All Our Stories

This is the final report of ICF GHK's evaluation of the All Our Stories (AOS) programme. AOS was a national programme that offered grants of £3,000 to £10,000 for community groups to carry out activities that help people explore, share and celebrate their local heritage. In October 2012, 542 projects were awarded grants with a total value of over £4.5m. They were expected to be completed by April 2014.

Projects had to produce a digital record of their activities, 'telling the story' of how the project has been delivered. Projects were supported in this activity by the Media Trust which was also commissioned by HLF to assist with increasing groups' digital skills. Alongside this, the Arts and Humanities Research Council supported projects' activity by providing access to specialist staff within universities, via the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement. Universities were expected to provide any relevant support that projects needed in relation to research and interpretation.

ICF GHK was commissioned by HLF to undertake research with a large sample of 110 projects to assess whether AOS has met its aims. We conducted three interviews with each grantee to gather evidence on expectations, achievements, outcomes and added value alongside documentary and digital material collected about the projects.

Application and monitoring

AOS succeeded in funding a broad range of organisations. About half were placed-based organisations, such as community history groups, community organisations and development trusts. Around a further third were groups representing local communities of interest, such as specific ethnic minorities, disabilities, faiths and ages.

About 70% of applicants were new to HLF. For many of the organisations, running heritage projects of this type was new to them.

Grantees reported that the opportunity to participate in the AOS programme presented them with the idea and the impetus, and the application form enabled them to form a clear project plan, generate enthusiasm and identify the resources needed from within the group and the wider community.

Applicants' responses to HLF's simplified application process were largely positive: the process ensured they carried out the necessary planning to ensure projects were viable while posing little additional administrative burden. The light-touch monitoring and reporting requirements of the AOS programme do not appear to have caused grantees to under-deliver; in fact the programme has been highly successful in delivering a range of outcomes relative to the size of grant.

Support from Media Trust and partner universities

About half of the grantees received support from universities, while about a third received bespoke support from the Media Trust. In most cases the support added value: it enabled

projects to conduct heritage activities and make use of digital technologies beyond the scope or scale of what would otherwise have been achievable. Where support was not accessed this was nearly always because the grantees did not require it. Overall the take-up of support and the outputs and outcomes produced suggest that the involvement of these partners was an integral part of delivering the projects' expected outcomes.

Project activities

Projects typically carried out a wide range of activities which included workshops and research, developing a walk or producing exhibitions and organising an event. These activities were often enabled and supported by training in a range of digital, research and interpretation skills. They were also often delivered through partnerships with heritage organisations and sometimes schools or other local community organisations.

In the main, projects ran to schedule. Where delays occurred these were generally due to factors beyond grantees' control such as illness, adverse weather or delays caused by partners. Activities produced a range of outputs: most commonly oral history recordings, exhibition panels, DVDs, books and websites.

Project outcomes

HLF introduced its outcomes framework in April 2013. Projects funded under All Our Stories were therefore not required to set out which outcomes they expected to achieve. As part of the evaluation, we have applied the outcomes retrospectively to help understand the impacts that the projects have had. The wide range of activities undertaken by projects delivered many HLF strategic outcomes, an average of nine outcomes per project.

All projects reported that people had an enjoyable experience through volunteering, learning, socialising with other members of the community and taking part in visits to heritage sites. All projects were also successful in enabling people to learn about the heritage of their local area. Nearly all projects engaged either a greater number or wider range of people to engage with heritage. Many of the project participants undertook training to carry out project activities, such as carrying out interviews and recording oral histories and undertaking archival research. This developed their skills and competences.

New local community heritage was recorded in nearly all cases – most commonly through oral histories or through collecting photographs and other heritage artefacts – and was interpreted and explained through exhibitions, workshops and talks, learning packs for schools or new interpretive materials, such as signs on a heritage trail.

As a result of the activities undertaken, including community engagement and partnership working in many cases, most grantees reported potential boosts to organisational resilience. This is reflected in new volunteers recruited beyond the life of the project, the development of promising and sustainable partnerships with other organisations, and a new or strengthened commitment to apply for and manage heritage projects in future.

Digital record

At the conclusion of the evaluation fieldwork in February 2014, 53 projects had uploaded a digital record; of these, 20 met or exceeded the HLF requirements for the number and type of media presented. It should however be noted that grantees were not required to meet the requirement within the timeframe of the evaluation period, so these findings may not be indicative of the final figures. Across the projects, photography was the most popular medium. Grantees were offered a range of support in uploading their digital records to Historypin, but the level of awareness among grantees of this requirement and how to use the site was mixed at the time of the evaluation.

Although not a part of the digital record requirement, approximately 10% of the projects used websites, social media or blogs to further share their project activities. These were generally updated as the projects progressed and often complemented the digital records in presenting media and outputs from the projects.

Participants welcomed the support from the Media Trust to complete their digital records (see Section 4). While we did not put the question directly, grantees did not generally describe difficulties in recording their activities. However, at the conclusion of the evaluation fieldwork, we heard that a significant proportion of the grantees were not aware of Historypin or able to use it. This may suggest a need for clearer communication and support to grantees in future.

Added value, legacy and sustainability

The funding has clearly provided significant added value to grantees' normal activities. Approximately two thirds of the grantees indicated that without the AOS funding the project would not have gone ahead in any form. Most often the reason for this was cost – whether for specific techniques, such as dendro-dating; visits to heritage organisations, or the production and exhibition of materials.

About a fifth of the projects suggested that the project could have proceeded without AOS funding, but would have been scaled back in some form, such as fewer activities or taking place over a longer time period. None were aware of other sources of funding which they might have accessed for the activities they decided to carry out. Most often projects suggested that if they had taken forward the project without the HLF grant it would not have included digital outputs. The university and/or Media Trust expertise gave invaluable support for grantees to produce exhibition and promotion materials (for example, the production and wide dissemination of DVDs containing heritage materials, and deliver outreach activities).

Most projects have provided a legacy in opening up and widening access to local heritage. This is mainly through the production of heritage resources made available to the public, exhibitions, and learning packs for schools. However, not all projects at the conclusion of the evaluation fieldwork, in February 2014, had yet acted to ensure that the outputs would be accessible over the long term.

As a result of being awarded AOS funding, many grantees reported new skills, networks, and an improved ability to apply for, manage and deliver similar projects. In this way, the programme should generate a legacy from grantee organisations' increased capacity.

In some cases project activity is continuing beyond the life of the grant, for example through continuing to collect and upload photographs and oral histories from community members and making these available online.

Recommendations to the Heritage Lottery Fund

On the basis of the findings ICF GHK makes the following recommendations to HLF:

Continue the light-touch monitoring and reporting requirements of the AOS programme with future small grant programmes because they do not appear to have caused grantees to under-deliver or fail to complete projects.

Consider further improving the well-received application form by providing supporting material on how to cost activities and professional time, a PDF version of the application form and an example of a completed application form.

Provide clearer direction and technical guidance to grantees on how and where to upload their digital records.

Continue to allow projects room for extensions where possible. Projects often appreciated the flexibility within their project plans and contractual arrangements to ensure that activities were delivered despite delays.

Facilitate the networking of projects and the sharing of good practice possibly with regional events since grantees attending AOS workshops appreciated the opportunity to network with other projects.

Consider providing programme funding for advice and guidance to grantees on conserving oral history archives and other products of research to reduce the risk that grantees will not be able to conserve and provide access to these.