

LGBT+ Futures: Equity Fund

An Interim Report Evaluating LGBT+ Consortium's Delivery

Feb 2023



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1. Introduction

LGBT+ Consortium is a charitable infrastructure organisation dedicated to supporting voluntary and community sector organisations that support LGBT+ people. LGBT+ Futures: Equity Fund is a participatory fund for organisations supporting intersectional LGBT+ people, which recognises the need for deeper investment in lived experience organisations targeting intersectional LGBT+ communities.

Funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK, and later supported by Comic Relief, and managed by LGBT+ Consortium, the [LGBT+ Futures: Equity Fund](#) has so far awarded £469,730¹ to 48 LGBT+ organisations and projects that are **led by and for:**

- D/deaf, Disabled, Neurodivergent LGBT+ people.
- LGBT+ People of Colour and People from Black, Asian and Minoritised Ethnicities
- LGBTQI+ Women.
- Older LGBT+ people.
- Trans and Non-Binary people

Consortium has commissioned Civil Society Consulting (CSC), a values-led not-for-profit consultancy to **assess the impact** of the fund, **identify its strengths and weaknesses**, and **evaluate how it can be enhanced**. CSC and Consortium also hope the final evaluation will also provide the blueprints for other funders working in other contexts.

In this interim report, based on the first phase of the funding period, CSC focused on evaluating the strength and weaknesses of the fund to develop practical recommendations that Consortium can consider and implement over the next year. At the time of writing this interim report, many grantees have only recently received their funding, so it is too soon to meaningfully assess the overall impact of the fund. Instead, this report takes the opportunity to deep dive into the first half of the funding journey, developing insights for Consortium on how to direct its efforts over the remaining eight months - expecting all grants to be fully spent by August 2023.

¹ This is the amount given out at the time of writing (3 December 2022). Both the total amount distributed and the number of successful applicants have increased since then.

2. Background of the Equity Fund

LGBT+ Consortium has been running successful grant giving programmes over the past few years, which have seen effective distribution of over£1 million to LGBT+ communities. On Thursday 3 February, The LGBT+ Futures: Equity Fund was launched - a two-year partnership between Consortium and The National Lottery Community Fund, thanks to National Lottery players. Comic Relief came on board to support with additional reach to the devolved nations. Drawing on its insight as an infrastructure charity with a membership of over 550 LGBT+ organisations, previous grant giving data and consultation work with ‘Community Collaborators’ - people from intersectional LGBT+ communities with experience in the sector - Consortium identified five intersectional community areas that are under-represented and under-resourced. These ‘communities of focus’ are:

- D/deaf, Disabled, Neurodivergent LGBT+ people.
- LGBT+ People of Colour and People from Black, Asian and Minoritised Ethnicities
- LGBTQI+ Women.
- Older LGBT+ people.
- Trans and Non-Binary people

During the development phase of the fund in early 2021, Consortium worked with Community Collaborators (intersectional LGBT+ organisations) to carry out community engagement and research to:

- understand the landscape for intersectional LGBT+ communities,
- understand their experiences and needs, and
- identify the breadth of organisations across the priority intersectionalities.

The report found that intersectional work is often undertaken at a grassroots level with limited financial and other resources, and by people from the same intersectional backgrounds. As this interim report will demonstrate, these types of organisations are the most effective way of reaching and supporting these communities, because they are trusted and embedded in the communities they serve.

LGBT+ communities have a long history of community support and mutual aid, and this legacy continues in the diverse organisations that are members of the Consortium and recipients of Equity Fund grants. However, grassroots organisations led by and for marginalised communities face barriers to accessing funding and resources. Both Consortium and CSC have observed and evidenced this (Consortium in its work and Equity Fund Development Report; CSC in its [recent research with social sector think tank New Philanthropy Capital \(NPC\)](#), and through delivering capacity-building support to 109 grassroots organisations through our flagship initiatives [Steps to Sustainability](#) and [Steps to Recovery](#)). People and processes are biased towards larger, more established organisations, and many funders lack understanding of the context of the work that organisations led by and for marginalised communities do. Additionally, the application and due diligence processes are not accessible, and those experiencing structural disadvantages often do not have the capacity and/or skills to meet funders’ requirements. What’s more, the charity sector as a whole is increasingly competitive for funding and resources.

The community consultation informed the key features that define the Equity Fund, which are:

Participatory and community-led

- Funding decisions are made by community-led panels (community panellists). There are five community panels, one for each community of focus. Community panellists share the intersectional background that the panel represents, but they also each bring multiple layers of identity, and many have experience working in the sector as well.

Investing as well as funding

- The Equity Fund provides funding for projects, as well as development grants and core funding, recognising that the latter is especially important for supporting the growth and sustainability of grassroots organisations.

Supportive, inclusive and accessible processes

- The application process is simplified, and proportional to the amount of funding being applied. Additional support included regular webinars for applicants, one-to-one meetings, and hands-on support when required.
- When assessing applications and due diligence, the team takes a case-by-case approach and takes into account the context of the application. Where there is information missing, they would request clarification or more information from the applicants before making a judgement.

The first phase of the Equity Fund was focused on distributing grants and now that most/all of the funds have been allocated, the second phase of the Equity Fund is aimed at providing this capacity-building support to grantees.

3. Evaluation Methodology

CSC is taking a participatory approach to the evaluation of the Equity Fund, involving all stakeholders, centering the voices of grant recipient organisations and community panellists.

Working with LGBT+ Consortium, we set up a **steering group** made up of three representatives of grant recipient organisations and three community panellists, with all five communities of focus represented. The steering group is involved in all stages of the evaluation, inputting on the design, analysis, and recommendations. Steering group meetings are chaired by CSC but discussions themselves are participant-led. Throughout the evaluation process, we have also had **regular discussions with the Equity Fund staff** to reflect on our processes and findings.

In consultation with LGBT+ Consortium and the steering group, we agreed on an approach that would minimise the burden on grant recipient organisations, while also collecting rich and informative data. We combined **qualitative** and **quantitative** methods:

- a straightforward mandatory 3-question baseline survey for all grant recipients;
- interviews with grant recipients (optional), panellists, and key staff members; and
- observations of the grants panel.

We will also launch a final survey in Summer 2023, when most of the grant funded activities are expected to have taken place and conduct further interviews. We worked closely with the steering group to develop these **data collection materials** to ensure language is appropriate and that they will stimulate nuanced and rich discussions. The steering group also provided oversight on our communications with the grant funded organisations, to ensure that it has the right tone and message.

All grant recipient organisations and panellists were remunerated for their participation, recognising the value of their contribution to the project.

For this interim report, our analysis draws on:

- All the baseline surveys that have so far been returned (n=28);
- Interviews with 12 grant recipients organisations,
- Interviews with four panellists, the Equity Fund Project Officer and Grants Officer.

All the interviews were carried out in November and December 2022 - online - while the baseline surveys are collected on a rolling basis from October 2022. We also drew on the Equity Fund's existing grantmaking data.

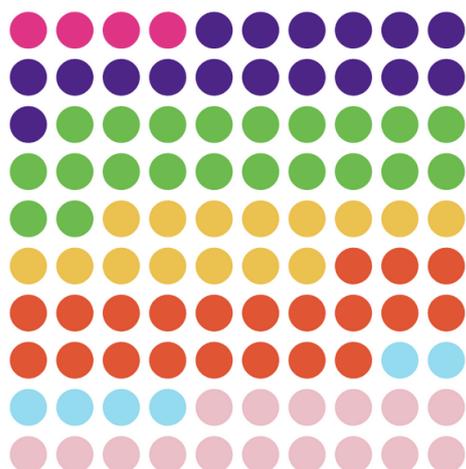
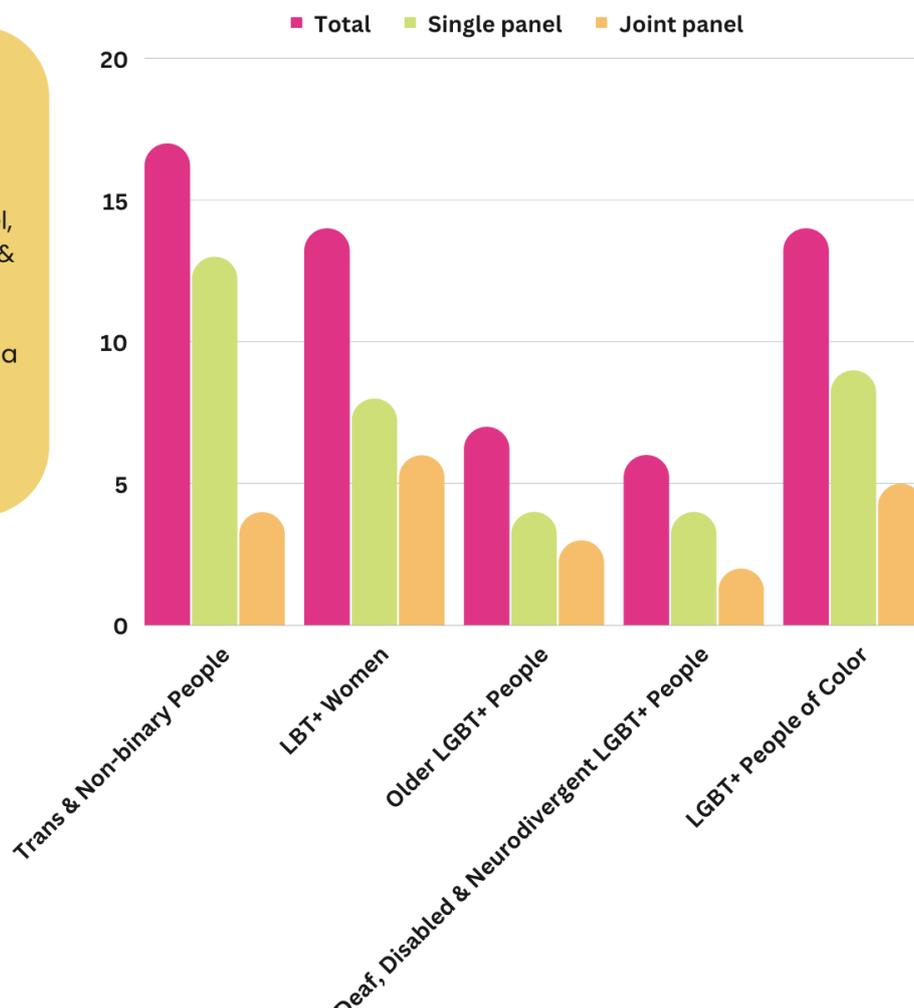


4. Snapshot of the grantmaking data

Below is a snapshot of the **grants made** by the Equity Fund, as of 3 December 2022 - including the types of grants awarded, and the types of organisations in recipient. The data is drawn from Consortium’s grantmaking database. As there are still outstanding grant decisions at this interim stage, the snapshot will be updated in the final report.

How many grants were awarded?

By number of grants awarded per panel, the Older panel and the Deaf, Disabled & Neurodivergent panels had the fewest. This is reflective of a lower number of applications to these panels, as well as a lower number of organisations that are led by and for these two communities overall



- Company limited by guarantee
- Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO)
- Unincorporated Association
- Informal community groups
- Community Interest Company (CIC)
- Registered Charitable Company
- Unknown

By which type of organisation?

Over one-third of successful applications are from unincorporated associations and informal community groups.

Where are grant recipients based?

The Equity Fund has reached every region in England (note that a separate pot of the fund for the devolved nations has a later deadline).

There is a higher concentration of successful applicants in more urbanised areas and in the South, which is likely to be reflective of the higher LGBTQ+ population, and consequently a higher number of led by and for organisations.



How much money was awarded?

The amount awarded is not always the amount requested – it is subject to panel discussions. Note that some small grant applications were awarded *more* money than requested; some applications were only partially funded.

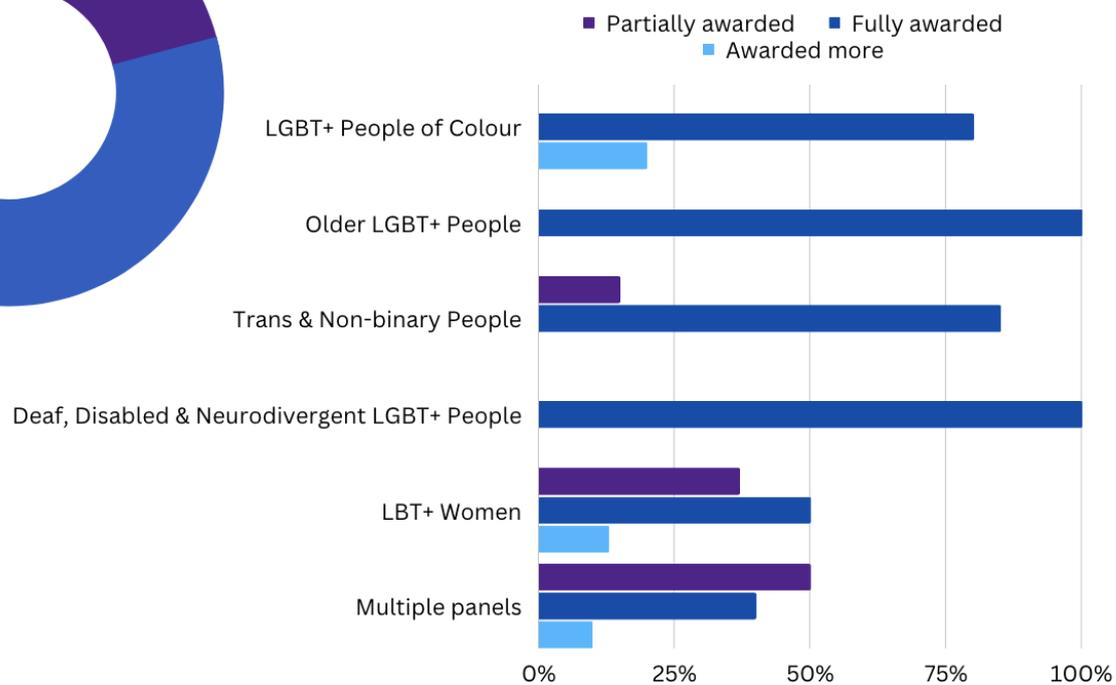
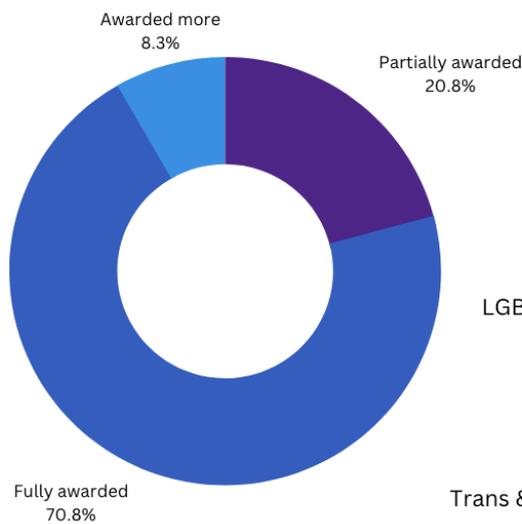


A closer look at the panels...

Who's getting partially funded and who's awarded more?

While the majority of applicants were awarded the amount that they requested, grant data shows that some panels have a greater tendency to offer partial funding. Applicants applying to more than one panel also more likely to be partially funded.

The People of Colour and Women panels have offered a larger grant than was applied for. Interview findings suggest that applicants to these two panels are more at risk of undershooting their budget and/or underestimating the potential scale of their project.

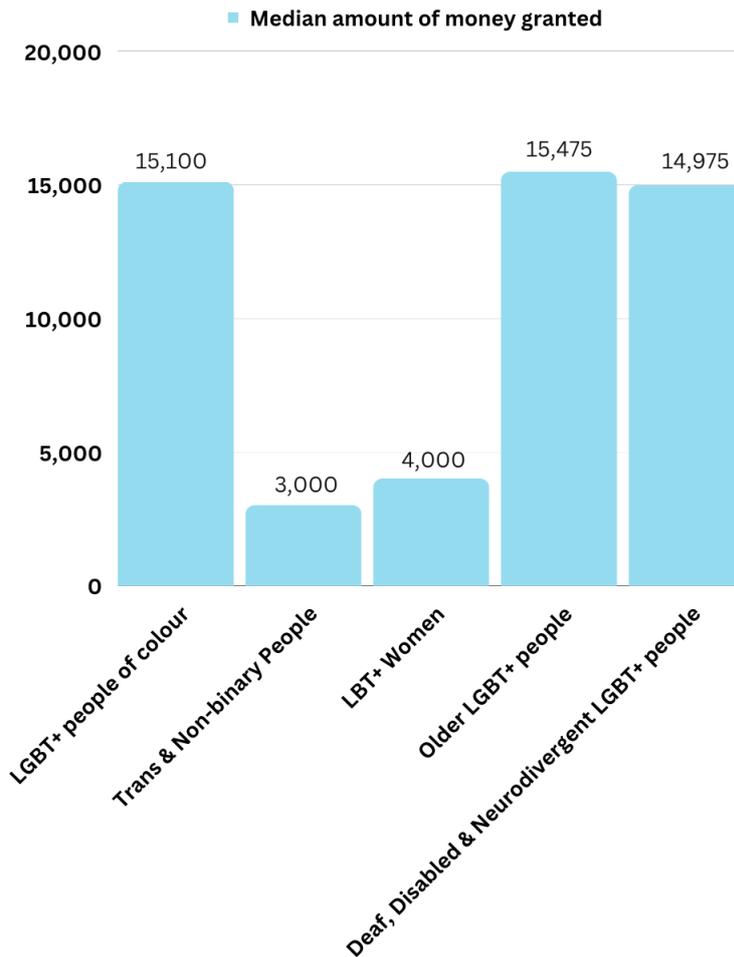
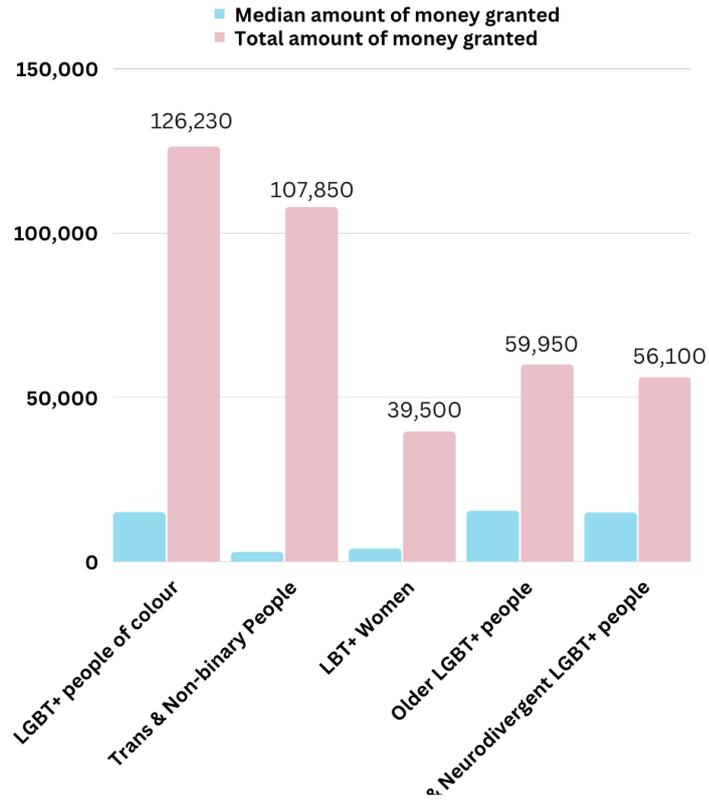


* The breakdown of successful grants by panels only accounts for applications that are submitted to that panel exclusively. On the contrary, if an application was submitted to multiple panels, it is included only in the 'multiple panels' category; it is not included in the categories of individual panels.

What's the average grant size?

Comparing the median amount awarded in each panel relative to the total amount awarded by each panel gives some indication to the size of grants given out. For example, a relatively higher median grant size in the Deaf, Disabled & Neurodivergent panel to the total amount of money granted suggests that this panel has given out larger grants.

Note that each panel started with the same amount of money, but panels who did not spend all their funding could allocate their money to a central pot that other panels could spend.



This graph provides a more detailed comparison of the median grant size per panel.

5. What impact is the fund having on people and organisations, so far?

The value of grassroots organisations led by and for intersectional communities

To summarise the impact that this fund is having, it's worth first of all setting out what makes grassroots organisations led by and for intersectional communities so effective. The Equity Fund was conceived on the idea that grassroots organisations are a highly effective way to support intersectional communities, which are under-served. Our evaluation has found this to be true: grassroots organisations are **agile**, deeply **motivated**, **trusted** by their community and **extremely knowledgeable** of their needs and what will work. We asked the grantees about why being led by lived experience and focused on specific intersectional communities is so valuable:

- **Agility:** being deeply embedded in the community, grassroots organisations are able to move quickly in response to challenges, community needs, and opportunities.
- Because of their huge buy-in, organisations led by and for intersectional communities are:
 - **Resourceful:** feeling accountable to their communities means that they find creative solutions when problems arise.
 - **Consistent and committed:** bigger organisations have a tendency to follow trends, launch initiatives to 'fix something' before moving on to something else, whereas organisations led by and for communities are committed to long-term continuation of their initiative.
- Organisations that are led by the community that it seeks to serve don't have to allocate as many resources into securing and sustaining engagement as a larger organisation not led by that community typically would - because they have their community's **trust** and pre-existing authentic connections.
 - *"The young people wouldn't be engaged if someone without the relevant lived experience was leading the project"*
 - *"Older LGBT+ people are terrified by the idea of mainstream services - they have been traumatised by negative experiences earlier in life and they fear that people won't respect who they are and how they identify."*
- The 'led by and for' grassroots organisations **appropriately address nuanced topics and intra-community issues** to prevent problems arising:
 - Many projects are related to mental and social wellbeing - but just because participants are from the same intersectional backgrounds doesn't mean they agree on everything. Yet, having a facilitator who is also a part of the community enables them to more effectively resolve differences and disagreements, before

they even arise, because they can speak from an informed position to build common ground. As one grantee put it: “we don’t have the dramas that someone without lived experience might have.”

- **Depth of impact:** grassroots, community led organisations are very effective at producing **deep** impact, i.e. addressing each individual’s complex needs and helping an individual on a very personal level, often holistically.

How is the fund impacting grassroots organisations led by and for intersectional communities?

Broadly, the fund is enabling these highly valuable organisations to survive and develop:

- **Survival:** The Equity Fund is funding organisations that would struggle to access mainstream funding - **35%** of survey respondents said they had not applied for a mainstream funding pot before. In the majority of interviews, grantees explained that they felt unlikely to be successful if they applied to mainstream funding, which made the prospect of putting time and energy into applications high-risk. Yet, many funded organisations described that it was difficult to imagine how they would be able to continue their work in the current tough financial climate without being financially supported. While they are committed to their communities, like many in the third sector, they are also at risk of burnout. Therefore, for many of its grantees, the Equity Fund is preventing invaluable organisations at risk of ‘giving up’ from doing so.
 - Over one-third of grantees are unincorporated associations and informal community groups - some of whom are being supported by Consortium to formalise their organisational structure - demonstrating that the fund is reaching organisations that are traditionally underserved by mainstream funders.
- **Organisational development:** Consortium is enabling organisations to develop and grow their capacity, and become more effective and sustainable organisations.
 - **Learning:** Consortium creates an effective learning environment where applicants are challenged but also supported through that challenge.
 - **100% of grantees said they were better equipped with skills for applying for funding (e.g. budgeting, communicating your idea clearly and convincingly).** Many grantees described that their writing skills have improved and they’re more able to articulate their community’s needs to funders.
 - **100% of grantees felt they have a better understanding of fundraising/funding processes.** Some had received advice on preparing supplementary materials, such as organisational policies and bank statements, which puts them in good stead when applying for future funding.

- **Increased capacity:** When properly resourced through the Equity Fund’s flexible funding, grantees told us that they are able to:
 - Have more time to fundraise. Being able to demonstrate that the organisation can manage a small pot of funding opens up opportunities for bigger ones.
 - Develop relationships with other people who are doing similar work - and not duplicate efforts. Some grantees are interested in expanding their work to different geographic areas, and are able to build up their presence and establish local connections to reach a broader audience.
 - Embed impact measuring/reporting/feedback practices.
- **Sustainability:** Grantees are building their organisational sustainability, for example:
 - **Paying people for their work:** many funded organisations are offering paid roles for the first time through their grant. This is especially important for grassroots organisations that have been entirely volunteer-led - their contributions to their communities deserve to be acknowledged, valued, and paid for. A grantee noted that there are often cycles of activism in the LGBT+ community, where people are active for a few years and then burnout because they are not properly resourced - so having resources to do this work ensures sustainability.
 - **Working in a more strategic way:** Grassroots organisations are often working with service users on a case-by-case, day-by day basis responding to immediate needs and concerns. Flexible funding allows organisations to work more strategically. Some examples include embedding systems and workflows for efficiency, providing volunteering training so they can be more autonomous, and developing resources (e.g. strategies, informational articles/documents).

- **Morale:** Despite the tight financial and resource constraints within grassroots organisations, the fact remains that people are not doing this work for money, but out of care for their community - evidenced by the fact that many grant recipient organisations have been running for a long time without paid roles; others continue to volunteer and contribute to the organisation out-of-pocket.
 - However, grantees described that being successful for the grant offers a boost in morale - it demonstrates that the work they do is valuable, and valued.
 - Even just knowing that there *is* a fund specifically for the intersectional communities they work with is encouraging.
 - The fund mitigates its negative impact on unsuccessful applicants by providing detailed and encouraging feedback in a relational way.

- **Building a stronger and more resilient network of LGBT+ organisations and communities** - including a new cohort of “queer leaders”. The fund is also

demonstrating to the sector the feasibility and value of funding grassroots organisations led by intersectional lived experience.

- Thanks to organisations' survival, development and morale boost, 'a new generation of queer leaders' are realising their abilities and worth: The fund is sending a powerful message to grantees that their work is significant, to be taken seriously and deserving of recognition.
- LGBT+ Consortium are sustaining positive relationships with a network of high impact organisations, so that they can support each other, work together and work in a coordinated way.
- This network is expanding: the Equity Fund is putting more community-led and grassroots on the radar. Both the grants team and panellists have pointed out that they have received many applications from organisations that they had not heard of, and who were not Consortium members. Through the fund, more organisations are aware of Consortium and the support it offers to grassroots organisations. Through the application support and experience of managing a grant, the Equity Fund also prepares these organisations for applying for funding from more mainstream funders.
- As more funded grassroots organisations are showing what they are capable of, the Equity Fund is effectively demonstrating that smaller organisations led by and for intersectional communities are *worth* funding and that this model of equitable and inclusive grantmaking is feasible. This has implications for how the sector looks to support other marginalised communities too (non LGBT+).



Photo: June Bellebono, OESTROGENERATION

How are the funded grassroots organisations impacting intersectional communities?

The Equity Fund is getting money to organisations that would struggle to access mainstream funding, which is enabling them to cater for their intersectional communities' needs in nuanced ways. Even across five highly varying communities of focus, there were some clear themes as to how the funded organisations were supporting intersectional communities:

- **Creating spaces where people are able to be themselves:**
 - **Positive mental health outcomes:** LGBT+ people with intersectional marginalisation can find themselves in a 'double bind'. For example, one funded organisation works with Chinese LGBT+ people living in the UK. The interviewee described that their beneficiaries may feel out of place in a 'mainstream' LGBT+ space due to cultural and language barriers, but they may also be uncomfortable sharing their LGBT+ identity in a Chinese space. Cultivating a space where both identities are centred is immensely valuable to mental health, as it allows them to develop both identities together and garners a strong sense of belonging.
 - **Engaging seldom served vulnerable people:** Amongst older LGBT+ organisations, there is an emphasis that many of their beneficiaries would not attend events if they were not specifically for older LGBT+ people. A rural LGBT+ organisation for older people said that their meetings are some people's only social interaction. One grantee gave an example of an 80 year old man who spoke about his LGBT+ identity for the first time during one of their meetings.
- **Creating opportunities for people to build meaningful support systems.**

There is value in being a part of a 'majority' - minoritised people are often expected to justify or explain themselves in different spaces. A grantee who received funding from the People of Colour panel pointed out that it is refreshing to not have to think about racial dynamics in their sessions. In particular, creating spaces where people who can understand each other's life experiences can connect reduces **emotional loneliness** - beneficiaries are able to understand each other on a deeper level.
- **Building mutually beneficial intergenerational connections - increasing older people's self worth and younger people's sense of heritage.** One grantee emphasised that older LGBT+ people are very easily forgotten and develop low self worth because of this - "*I have overheard younger LGBT+ folk expressing they didn't know there are older LGBT+ people!*". At the same time, younger LGBT+ people benefit from having a chosen family - but it's not always an intergenerational family. Therefore they miss out on a sense of heritage, because intergenerational relationships are important for storytelling. Bringing together LGBT+ people of different ages to build intergenerational connections is mutually beneficial. Young LGBT+ people can learn about the history of the community, while older LGBT+ people are able to share their stories and feel valued and energised.

- **Filling in the gaps.** Without the initiative of people from within the community, the work that grantees are doing is simply not going to be done. It is beyond the scope of public services, which lack agility as well as resources and knowledge, and even many larger charitable organisations. For example, an organisation working with the trans community discussed how trans healthcare advocacy has always been a community-led initiative. The needs of the trans community are so peripheral to healthcare policies, that without advocacy from within the community, the healthcare system would not even be aware of these needs.
- **Raising the profile of intersectional LGBT+ identities and advocacy.** Many grant funded organisations are working directly with members of the community, and a big part of this work is cultivating a sense of belonging and pride - for example, organising Pride events, providing for LGBT+ writing and art, and archiving LGBT+ history. A number of grantees are working in a more targeted way: advocating, campaigning, or providing training for improved service provision and/or Improved policymaking and delivery.

How is the Equity Fund impacting community panellists?

A participatory way of working is never one-sided - so it is important that panellists don't feel like they are just providing a service. Speaking to panellists, it's evident that the Equity Fund is synergistic. Community panellists find meaning in their work in that their decisions matter - their varied and often challenging experiences are put into good use! What's more, panellists are developing themselves professionally and intellectually.

- **Professional development:** tangible skills that panellists have gained include leadership, decision-making, collaborative and team working, as well as financial management, fundraising, and general knowledge about the sector.
- **Personal development and learning:** some panellists reflected that the experience helped them reflect on their own processes, positionality, and biases. They also learnt more about each others' relationships to their communities. There is also a sense of reward from being able to "make a positive impact".
- **Broadening social and professional circles:** panellists have different levels of experience working with their communities, and the Equity Fund brought together people from different backgrounds and professional circles and connected with different parts of the community.

6. The funding journey - from the grantholder perspective

We interviewed 12 Equity Fund grantees to capture their experiences of the Equity Fund so far. We ascertained the following strengths and identified potential weaknesses. Across the board, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive, so it's worth caveating by saying that the following 'opportunities for improvement' are exactly that - they are not weaknesses per se and only apply to a small minority of cases. One grantee described 'scraping the barrel' to think of ideas for how the fund can improve!

What's working well for grantees

- **Thanks to the specific eligibility criteria, organisations led by and for intersectional LGBT+ communities feel the fund is for them.**

As a result, they felt encouraged to put in an application and generally feel valued and energised.

- One grantee remarked that it was unusual that the word 'intersectionality' was actually specifically mentioned, the focus on intersectionality made them feel like it was worth taking the time to apply, as the fund is 'for them'. In the words of another grantee, *"LGBT+, old, and rural is not heard in the same sentence very often. The fact that the fund specifically mentioned older LGBT+ people felt inviting"*
- Similarly, the specific eligibility criteria helped applicants understand that intersectional communities are at the centre of the fund, whereas DEI can often feel like an afterthought among mainstream funders. Applicants felt like the fund wanted to fund them and reduced pressure, knowing that they are sharing a pot with similar organisations rather than competing with well-resourced, larger organisations.

The eligibility criteria was also praised for having appropriate governance requirements (e.g. welcoming CICs, informal community groups and unincorporated associations) and that the five communities of focus have been split up appropriately - *"if there are too many, it becomes less impactful and effective"*, one grantee explained.

- **Grant-making panels with lived experience swiftly understand the context and value of applicants' work. Aware of this, grantees feel motivated to apply and develop their applications.**

When dealing with mainstream funders in an 'open marketplace', grantees felt that funders don't understand the reasons for why the project needs to be funded and the background context. By contrast, Equity Fund grantees felt reassured and motivated knowing that those reviewing their application would have a **pre-existing understanding** of the challenges facing their community, which meant they don't need to 'over-justify' their work or write to a sceptical ear. It was also evident that panellists are **intrinsically motivated** and **empathetic**.

- One organisation said they wouldn't bother trying to pit themselves against mainstream orgs because they know they will not succeed and *“past failure to try and communicate [the value of our work] is beginning to exhaust [us]”*.
- Even grants that are for specific marginalised communities can be inaccessible to intersectional LGBT+ organisations. For example, a grantee talked about their experience applying to grants for women-led organisations - very few projects for LGBT+ women get funded, as grant-making panels lack understanding of the context and necessity of the work. Grantees working with older LGBT+ people had the same experience applying to grants for older people - they were challenged for ‘excluding’ older people that are not LGBT+.
- Many grantees remarked that they wouldn’t have taken the time to put in an application to the Equity Fund if they hadn’t known that their application would be assessed by people with lived experience.
- The panels ask the ‘right’ questions. For example, a grantee whose organisation works with people on the autism spectrum pointed out that there are many organisations that are run by parents of autistic people rather than being genuinely led by lived experience. The grantee was impressed that this was something that the panel was aware of, and asked about. At the same time, the grantee was not asked any questions that made them feel uncomfortable or misunderstood, as they had experienced in the past - instead, they had a positive and reassuring experience.

● **Decision-makers are results-oriented, long-termist and trusting in its stance on how organisations spend their funding.**

There is a feeling that mainstream funders ‘pick and choose’ to sign up to particular outputs. By contrast, Equity Fund staff and panellists are realistic about the operational realities of being a grassroots organisation, and are willing to fund the aspects of organisations’ work that don’t lead to immediate impact, but are vital for the organisation needs to sustain and develop (i.e. the less ‘sexy’ side of organisations’ work). Staff and panellists trust the grantee to set their own priorities as to what the funding should be spent on and are willing and open to seeing that this may be different for every organisation. As a result, organisations feel like they’re being invested in.

- Many mainstream are flexible and understanding, but *“nothing like the authentic relationship that we have with Consortium, which allows us to be honest”*. Grantees can discuss ideas about how to use the funds without worrying that if they say one wrong thing, they’ll be in trouble. One organisation described discussing their spending with Consortium staff and deciding that the grant would be most impactful if spent on securing a venue and media coverage - the grantee felt it would be difficult to make the case for this with a mainstream funder.
- Equity Fund staff and panellists see the value in providing resources that will enable the organisation to take their foot off the accelerator: many funders would see sustaining what you’re doing as your own problem, whereas Consortium see the value of preventing burnout.

- One grantee said it was apparent that the Equity Fund is minded to the community's needs: “[applying to the Equity Fund, it felt like] the proposed project should meet the community's needs, rather than the funders' needs as it often feels.”

● **The application process is structured/designed well.** Grantees appreciated that the application process was relatively stress-free, thanks to it being:

- **Straightforward:** grantees appreciate the one-stage process. The form itself was described as straightforward too. Numerous grantees remarked that the quick processes meant they stayed motivated. An older grantee mentioned that whereas they have had difficulties navigating complicated online application forms in the past, this was not the case with the Equity Fund.
- **Well-publicised:** grantees described hearing about the opportunity from multiple sources, both online and through word of mouth.
- **Accessible:** the written portions of the application felt manageable to grantees. The option of video applications was particularly useful for neurodivergent applicants.
- **Proportional** to the grant size: the Equity Fund had two application forms - the forms for smaller grants (under £1,000) required less detailed information. The supplementary documentation that the Equity Fund requires is also less demanding than traditional funders.
- **Well-communicated:** When it comes to the language around the five communities of focus, grantees generally felt that they described their communities well. Also, applicants knew what to expect from the application journey.

Recommendation: Some people within grassroots organisations are a bit scarred from how other funders have treated them. Even when encouraged to feel they are in safe hands, some were still concerned that they might be tricked by ‘relaxing too much’. Acknowledging this in communications may help grantees get the full benefits of the well-designed application process.

● **Grantees are boosted by the relational and supportive funding journey, including pre-application support.** They generally appreciate being met by a ‘softer’ interface:

- **Interactive:** organisations are given many opportunities to reach out for support and discuss their application. There are regular drop-in sessions where applicants can find out more information. The grants team also held one-to-one meetings with applicants providing hands-on support with aspects of their application. Notably, the relationship is two-way, as the Grants Team also encourages and takes seriously feedback from grantees, which creates a trusting relationship between the Consortium and the grantee community. For example, one grantee worked with the Grants Team to develop improved reporting materials.

Opportunities to improve the funding journey

- **Many grantees expressed they want to be connected with one another.**

- **Many also expressed a desire to receive other types of capacity-building support:**

- Consortium is in an excellent position to create opportunities for grant recipients to meet each other and collaborate. As one grantee put it: *“not a lot of input would be needed from Consortium to do this, they just need to be a platform”*.
- Grantees expressed that they would like to receive capacity-building support. To paraphrase one interviewee: *“LGBT+ grassroots orgs are driven by people who have a lot of passion, but not always the skills to follow through - so there also needs to be an opportunity to build up those skills”*. In the words of another: *“at this stage in our organisational development, we would find it helpful to have workshops around skills running an organisation - e.g. governance, how to register as a charity/CIC, funding workshops that runs through skills for applying to less 'friendly' grantmakers.”*
- A grantee for whom the Equity Fund was their first ever grant application found it so easy that they were concerned that they may be unprepared for a more mainstream grant. Extra fundraising support sessions (to build capacity around preparing other grants) could help address this.
- A grantee also suggested there could be specific governance and capacity-building support at the pre-application stage to help organisations who wish to improve their governance and financial management in order to apply for the maximum amount of funding. This can be a particular barrier for organisations in the d/Deaf, disabled and neurodivergent community
- Some grantees worry that the simplified and accessible application process means that they are still not fully ready to meet a mainstream funder's expectations.

Recommendations:

- Explore cost-effective ways of bringing grantees together, for example leveraging Consortium's existing network meetings by signposting these to grantees.
- As Consortium enters the second phase of the Equity Fund, which is focused on capacity building, consider how capacity-building support is delivered. Civil Society Consulting (CSC) has a capacity-building programme called Steps to Sustainability, which is based on a 'learning by doing' principle. Through S2S, CSC offer free consultancy support to co-develop up to five key outputs (e.g. an impact report, a new website) *whilst* coaching and upskilling the organisation's team and building their confidence in key processes. Organisations learn by doing, gain confidence and by focusing on co-production rather than learning per se, organisations end up with tangible outputs at the end.

● **The application process and communication with the grants team is described by some applicants as slow, but better communication about timelines could mitigate the negative impact of this.**

Whilst most grantees praised the Equity Fund for its exceptionally speedy turnarounds, some applications took longer to process, because of the timing at which it was submitted in relation to the next panel meeting. Some applicants also experienced delays in email response time, due to limited staff capacity. These grantees described that this had had some negative impact. For example:

- Grantees expressed that they need a clear timeline in order to be able to plan and budget: *“not getting the money on time is very stressful, because it is difficult to plan and strategise”*.
- One grantee ended up missing a key date on which they intended to launch their project (Lesbian Day of Visibility).

All this said, all decisions were made within four months of submission*, and this timeframe was communicated to applicants from the outset.

- This is considerably faster than many grant decisions. However, for many grantees, this was their first experience applying for funding, so they did not have other experiences as a benchmark.
- As above, four months is a relatively short turnaround time for UK civil society funders. Complaints of slow turn around could indicate that community-led grassroots organisations do not have the luxury of being able to withstand uncertainty and longer decision-making timeframes - unlike more established organisations with larger reserves. This conclusion is in line with CSC’s findings from its recent research with NPC.

**with the exception of two grant applications, which were less than one week over the four-month window.*

Recommendations:

- Applicants are very understanding that Consortium is itself a charity with limited resources, so the best way to mitigate the negative effects of delays is simply being upfront about them as much as possible. For example, during the next funding round, if an application comes a long way off from the next grantmaking panel meeting, let the applicant know that this is the case and give them a clear estimation of time.
- Consortium could also make the case for increasing the Grants Team’s capacity for more timely communications.
- Explore the potential of supporting applicants to improve their financial planning as a way of mitigating the impact of longer decision timeframes.
- Adjust communications to set more realistic expectations around timeframes, so that applicants who are less experienced with the grantmaking process understand

- **Some grantees felt that their application had not been well-understood, despite being assessed by community panellists.** In discussions with grantees and panellists, we found two potential explanations for this:

- Having lived experience enables decision-makers to form judgments swiftly. However, in some cases, perhaps panellists are forming judgement prematurely, without listening to the full story.
- Even within each community of focus, there are vastly different backgrounds, experiences and positionalities. The d/Deaf, neurodivergent and disabled panel and the people of colour panel in particular receive a wide range of applications that address different communities and experiences. In some cases, only one panellist who had direct lived experience on an issue; there have also been occasions where an external person was consulted on issues that no one had lived experience on.
- Projects that address multiple intersecting identities can be a blindspot for panellists. For example, a project that is led by and for Black trans women would be assessed separately by the trans panel, people of colour panel, and the women's panel; panellists may miss out the additional dimensions of the project that they do not have lived experience on.

Recommendation: Encourage panellists to:

- Remember to consider the whole application before forming a judgement.
- Remember to be aware of blindspots for applications that are being reviewed by more than one community panel.

- **In some cases, partial funding was described as having been actively unhelpful:**

- For some grantees, particularly those who do not have alternative sources of funding, receiving partial funding significantly alters the budget allocation for a project, which can *significantly* inhibit how successful and impactful a project is. One grantee that was partially funded mentioned that not having the full amount of money means that they have to cut off important aspects of their project, such as providing new employees with the level of training and oversight required to deliver their project well. Another grantee remarked that the success of one project has implications for the organisation's overall sustainability.
- However, it should also be noted that when awarding with a partial grant, the grant is much less restrictive: the grantee is not expected to use the money on the project proposed in the application, they can, for example, put it towards core costs or organisational development.

Recommendations:

- Investigate an organisation's circumstances before making the decision to offer partial funding. Confer and discuss with the applicant, rather than making the decision without them.
- Communicate the reasoning for partial funding very clearly.

- If an organisation's long-term survival and/or impact is at stake as a result of partial funding, Consortium could investigate how it can actively support the partial grantee to get the funding from elsewhere or through other means, especially as we move into the capacity-building phase. Another solution could be for Consortium to allow partially funded grantees to reapply for further funding towards the end of their funding period.
- Given that many funders have a bias to fund charities that have already been well-resourced in the past, it is possible that some applicants downplay their need for core funds when they put forward an application for project funding (which leads to partial funding when partial funding is not appropriate). CSC and Consortium should explore this theory between now and the final report.

● **In a few cases, grant recipients weren't aware of what Consortium had to offer as a membership organisation,** particularly those who did not have as much contact with the grants team - e.g. recipients of smaller grants.

Recommendation: Consortium could emphatically signpost grantees to become members of the Consortium in awards letters and provide information on the support available. The latter may be particularly relevant to the second phase of the current round of funding.



Photo: Sydney McCourty, OPENING DOORS

7. Behind the scenes - strengths and weaknesses from the panellist perspective

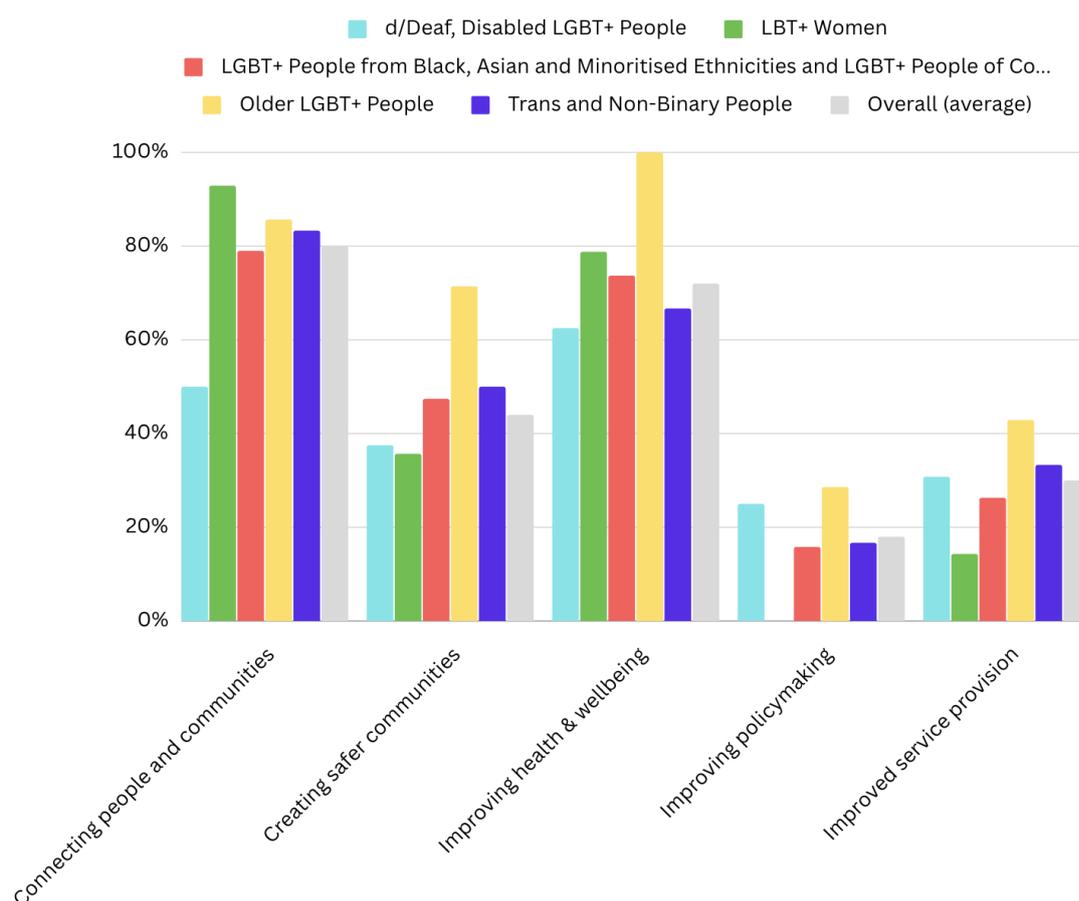
Having ascertained the successes and weaknesses of the fund from the perspective of the grantees, CSC explored the strengths and weaknesses of the fund from the perspective of those delivering it. We reflected on our findings from interviews with grantees and reviewed the grantmaking data again, before interviewing four community panellists, as well as the two grant officers. We also sat in on one grant panel meeting (with the women's panel). We didn't get to interview anyone on the trans & nonbinary panel which means that we are missing their perspectives at this stage.

About the panels - a snapshot

There are five decision-making panels - one for each community of focus. Through our evaluation, we have discovered that each panel has evolved different approaches to decision-making. Below, we explore some of the significant trends within each panel.

There are also some emerging trends in the type of work being funded by each panel. When submitting an application to the Equity Fund, applicants are asked to select the outcomes that their project contributes to, based on Consortium's [LGBT+ Common Outcomes Framework](#). The graph below gives an indication to the different project types that are common in each community of focus. (Note that a small number of applications did not tick any of the project outcomes, and applicants can tick more than one project outcome.)

Successful applicants' intended project outcomes, by community of focus



- D/deaf, Disabled and Neurodivergent LGBT+ People:** The d/Deaf, Disabled and Neurodivergent panel represents a large and diverse community of focus, which meant that it was difficult to represent all the experiences that applicants are working on. In some cases, only one panellist represented a certain intersection (e.g. there was one deaf panellist), which meant that they were counted on to make the decision for all applications of that intersection.
 - This panel received the fewest applications. All grants were given the amount that was requested.
 - Applications to this panel are more likely to contribute to improving policy making and improving service provision than other panels; the most common project outcome is improving health and wellbeing.
- LGBT+ Women:** This panel built consensus easily and made decisions quickly. They were keen to support all eligible projects and did not apply the 'by and for' criteria as strictly - some projects that were for a majority of LGBT+ women (rather than *only* LGBT+ women) were funded.
 - The LGBT+ Women panel gave out the highest number of partial grants; they also awarded the smallest amount of money overall. However, they are also one of two panels that gave out more money than was requested on some decisions (the other being LGBT+ People of Colour).

- A grantee pointed out that many organisations led by and for LGBT+ women tend to be small, disjointed, and focused on social activities/meet ups. Many have been running for a very long time, but do not have a strong online presence - this could explain why the panel has the smallest average grant size.
 - Applications to this panel were more likely to contribute to connecting people and communities. They were less likely to contribute to improved service provision, and no applications contributed to improving policy making.
- **LGBT+ People from Black, Asian and Minoritised Ethnicities and LGBT+ People of Colour:** This is one of the largest panels, representing many experiences and backgrounds. Due to the diverse range of backgrounds and experiences represented on this panel, panellists were very conscious about centering the voices of those who have the most experience on an issue when making a decision.
 - The panel received the second largest number of applications; they also awarded the most amount of money overall.
 - The panel was more likely than other panels to award more money than originally requested.
 - Applications to this panel were most likely to contribute to connecting people and communities and improving health and wellbeing.
- **Older LGBT+ People:** This panel has fewest panellists and also received the lowest number of applications. Because of panellists' limited availability, some discussions took place through email exchanges. This format worked well for discussions, as panellists had time to think and respond with well-thought out responses.
 - The panel received the lowest number of applications.
 - All applications to this panel contribute to improved health and wellbeing; most of them also contribute to connecting people and communities, and creating safer communities.
- **Trans and Non-Binary People:** This panel received the most applications in the first few rounds of funding, many of them from well-established trans and non-binary-led organisations and requesting for relatively large grants. As a result, compared to other panels, the panel had more discussions around 'value for money' and thinking about which projects would be the most impactful.
 - However, this panel actually ended up having the smallest median grant size - perhaps due to running out of money quickly. They were also one of the panels who gave out a significant number of partial grants, alongside LGBT+ women.

What's working well

- **Panellists make informed funding decisions, effectively and confidently.** A salient theme that panellists emphasised was the quality of the decisions being made. Drawing on their lived experience, panellists make decisions that are well-informed and

in the interest of the community they represent. Notably, several panellists picked up on the idea of '**local knowledge**' - drawing on their relationships and knowledge of a community or organisation to contextualise the work that grant applicants are doing. Thanks to being well-informed, the panels' decision-making is:

- **Rigorous and appropriate:** With lived experience and relevant 'local knowledge', panellists are able to ask the right questions, and prioritise issues and organisations as they know what's urgent and pertinent to the challenges that their community is facing. This led to panels even awarding more money than was requested in many cases to ensure that a project can be done properly, with adequate resourcing.
- **Swift and efficient:** When a panellist is aware of the work that an applicant is doing, they will share their understanding of that organisation's work as well as any concerns with the group. Little time is wasted on 'background checks' because panellists have excellent contextual knowledge already.
- **Equitable:** Typically, better resourced and more established organisations are more likely to be successful and awarded funding by most funders. However, this dynamic is turned on its head in the context of the Equity Fund, whereby any larger established organisations will be given scrutiny as to whether the work they are doing will really support the community of focus that they select on their grant application, as the panellists implicitly understand that grassroots organisations tend to have higher and more direct impact (because of the reasons set out in section 5 of this report). For example, one larger, more established organisation ended up being rejected on the basis that it only serves an already privileged community so its impact was less in terms of 'distance travelled'.

Informed decision-making that was rigorous, swift and equitable was credited to:

- **Panellists lived experience,** which gives panellists empathy and local knowledge.
- **Panellists' sector expertise and experience running a grassroots organisation:** Apart from their 'local knowledge' and lived experience, panellists also come with a range of professional and learned expertise from their backgrounds working in and across different sectors, and through activism and community organising. Thanks to this experience, the panel can critically assess applications from a practical perspective. Flagging practical concerns is not aimed at turning down applications - rather, it's aimed at ensuring that projects can be carried out successfully. In some cases, this led to panels awarding a larger grant than was originally requested. In other cases, applicants were offered a lower/partial grant rather than a 'hard no'. For example, a younger and less-established organisation received a partial grant, based on panellists' views that it would be more beneficial to fund core costs for the organisation to establish itself, rather than funding a project which may cause an organisation to run over-capacity and leave the organisation worse off.

- **The diversity of *lived* experience within each panel:** Being able to draw on different panellists' understandings of their community was also seen as an important aspect of the decision-making process - especially in the case of the People of Colour and the Deaf, Disabled and Neurodivergent panels, due to the different ethnicities/cultures, disabilities and neurodivergence that the panels encompass. In most panellists' accounts, where an application was clearly aimed at serving one group within the panel (e.g. a project specifically for Black people and not all people of colour; or a project for neurodivergent people rather than disabled or deaf people), the panellists will give space to people within the panel who are the closest or have the most experience with that particular community to provide insights before making decisions, ensuring that they are well-informed about the nuances of that community's experiences and issues.
- **The diversity of *learnt* experience on each panel** leads to different people focusing on different aspects of an application - some people may be clued into where the budget or description of projects/events may be unrealistic or well-considered. For example, panellists will raise their concerns if the application lacks detail on how specific accessibility needs will be met, or if the budget for salaries or costs of running an event is too low or too high based on panellist's previous experiences. In short, the multidisciplinary panel means each application gets a holistic review.
- **The well-designed application reviewing interface:** Panellists praised the streamlined application reviewing process and platform's ease of use, which helped with the efficiency of the decision-making process.

Recommendation: Review and document these with a view to sustain and replicate these good practices for future iterations of the Equity Fund in case of staff changes.

- **Community panellists are reflexive and accountable.** Panellists examine their own feelings, reactions, and motives and how these influence what they do or think in response to each application. They appreciated that different ways of knowing were equally valued - which is important for equity. They also felt accountability and ownership over their decisions.
 - A panellist mentioned that they tried to consciously avoid "artificial barriers" that may determine the success of an application. For example, panellists recognised that people have different levels of experience writing grant applications, and that many factors may affect the way an application is written (e.g. English not being a first language, neurodivergence). At the same time, the strength of the written application only has a weak correlation with the organisation's ability to carry out the work well. Therefore, if some information is missing or the application lacks clarity, panellists would first try to ask for more information (supported by the grants team) before ruling out an application. However, panellists noted that they had to *actively* be aware of their bias towards well-written applications.

Recommendation: Review and document these with a view to maintain and replicate these good practices for future iterations of the Equity Fund in case of staff changes (e.g. use this analysis to develop a guidance note for chairs and/or code of conduct for panellists, or incorporate into existing documents).

● **Collaborative decision-making and consensus-building, thanks to a shared understanding/shared goals.**

The panellists we spoke to found it difficult to recall any decisions from the panels that they personally disagreed with, because grant decisions were made through a consensus-building process. Note that for this report, we were only able to speak to panellists from the People of Colour, Older and d/Deaf, Disabled and Neurodivergent panels - we aim to bring in perspectives from the Trans and Non-binary and Women panels in the final report.

- **Unrushed discussions of each application:** During panel meetings, each application is given ample time for all panellists to fully explore the information available and share their thoughts and concerns. In general, if someone feels that they do not fully understand the issues or the context of an application, they will hear about the issue from someone else on the panel who is closer to the target community before making a decision. Notably, it's not unusual for a panel to reach a consensus very quickly, because the panellists have already read through and familiarised each application, and are each so well-informed to process information swiftly.
- **Having a clear shared goal and a culture of camaraderie paves the way for constructive discussions:** Panellists reported high levels of harmony and alignment: they want to ensure that the money reaches the community and have a vested interest in funded projects going well. Combined with commonalities in their backgrounds and positionalities, they work collaboratively to agree on the best way to allocate funding. Several interviewees specifically mentioned that the panel feels like a safe space to ask questions and raise concerns. One panellist also said that disagreements are considered to be a positive part of the process, as they ensure that decisions are thoroughly-considered. A key component of consensus building is ensuring that everyone feels their opinions and views are valued - interviewees mentioned that they feel “*taken seriously*” and “*heard*”.
- **Skilled facilitation by impartial chairs:** When disagreements occur, chairs’ expert facilitation was touted as being absolutely key to ensure that they are resolved productively and that relationships between panellists are not ruptured. By summarising key points, and using open questions to steer the conversation, chairs help panellists remember that they have the same goal - to do what’s best for the community. Chairs also offered compromises and solutions for moving forward with the best of both perspectives, as well as requesting more information from the applicant to clear up the points of contention. As one

panellist said, instead of asking whether an application is “good enough”, the panel tends to ask “what can make the application better?”

Recommendations:

- Review and document these factors with a view to maintain and replicate these good practices for future iterations of the Equity Fund in case of staff changes (e.g. use this analysis to develop a guidance note for chairs and/or code of conduct for panellists, or incorporate into existing documents).
- Encourage panellists to anticipate disagreement and see it as a positive thing right from the outset may help maintain harmony on panels in the long-term.

Grants officers provide skillful, impartial facilitation - within panels and between panels and applicants.

When asked about what works well about the decision-making process, the immense value that the Grants Team brings was emphasised. In particular:

- **Guiding productive conversations:** There was a consensus that without the structure and leadership provided by Grants Officers, the decision-making process would not have worked.
- **Impartiality (not neutrality):** Neutrality is a passive policy, without a core principle other than the avoidance of trouble. Instead of focusing on neutrality, Grants Officers are impartial - working without bias, prejudice, or preferences, but with agency. The Grants Team regarded their role as being to facilitate the conversation - they consciously tried to influence panels’ decisions as little as possible and give full control to panellists, but still played an active role to effectively resolve tensions and disagreements.
- **Conflicts of interest are handled well:** Panellists declare any potential conflicts of interest ahead of time and are put into the ‘waiting room’ (on Zoom) while the discussion takes place.
- **A culture of openness and flexibility:** Panellists appreciated that the grants team are open to adapting the decision-making process when things are not working as expected - there is a feeling of ‘we are all on the same learning journey’ so panellists can shape the way things are done. For example, panellists originally had access to the grants team’s internal notes about applicants, which started to influence the panels’ decisions. When this concern was raised, the grants team hid these notes from the panellist so that the decisions were made in a more impartial way.
- **Part of the community:** Both members of the grants team come from multiple communities of focus - which helped with building rapport with panellists and grantees. They were also good at ‘sense-checking’ applications - for example, they were able to filter out offensive/inappropriate applications so panellists did not have to interact with them.

Weighing up risk appropriately to fund innovative ideas that are high-impact:

- Mainstream funders often frame their due diligence processes around the management of financial risk, but the Equity Fund recognises that this poses an artificial barrier for organisations that are inexperienced or lack the resources to meet due diligence criteria, but whose work with the target communities is unparalleled. This barrier can be regarded as ‘artificial’ because smaller, grassroots organisations arguably pose less of a financial risk - they have high impact, they make budgets go far, they feel accountable to their communities, which means absolutely no mismanagement of budget and instead, creative solutions when problems arise.
- Instead of turning down applications that fail to meet due diligence, the panel and the grants team works with applicants to ask further questions and find solutions so that good project ideas can be funded. For example, applicants who do not have a bank account in place are able to nominate a registered charity to hold the grant in trust (in practice, Consortium ended up being the nominated charity in most cases).
- The Equity Fund is interested in funding good project ideas rather than minimising risk - those with lived experiences are particularly aware of the value of the role that grassroots organisations play for their community. As a result, even applications that are ‘high risk’ have been successful, to give them an opportunity to establish themselves and grow.

A culture of flexibility and openness - the fund is a learning journey:

Panellists praised the sense of flexibility and openness with which the Consortium team managed the Equity Fund, which has set the tone for community panellists, who also follow suit. Everyone agreed that the Equity Fund is a process of learning and exploration for everyone involved - Consortium, the panellists, and the grantees. Two examples of how this adds value:

- Panellists give applicants the benefit of the doubt: when uncertain about the details of an application (e.g. unrealistic budget, question about the clarity/purpose of the project), panels request more information/clarification through the Grants Team. There is less pressure on grant applicants to ‘get it right on the first try’.
- The eligibility criteria is interpreted in context, not applied as a blanket rule: for example, some applicants are set up to be ‘run by and for’ the community, but the board of the organisation may not always be from the community. One of the reasons for this is that for intersectional communities who are already facing structural barriers, it can be difficult to find enough people to take on unpaid leadership roles.

Opportunities for improvement

● **Risk of biases and conflicts of interest.** Though it's net positive that panellists have 'local knowledge', local knowledge inherently gives rise to potential for unconscious bias. Many panellists are also actively engaged in engagement and outreach, using their networks to spread the word about the Equity Fund. We posed this to interviewees to understand how they navigate the potential for bias:

- One way that panellists address their biases is through actively reflecting on their positions, and interrogating why they may prefer an application over another. For example, a panellist noticed that they were critical towards some applications because they were not a part of the community that the applicant worked with, and so did not fully understand the value of the work. However, during the panel meeting, this panellist deferred the decision to others who had direct experience.
- Many panellists emphasised that the diversity of backgrounds and experiences represented on the panel mitigates individual biases dominating a decision - even if one or a few people were aware of an organisation beforehand, it's unlikely that they will receive preferential treatment.
- With this said, it would be unrealistic to say that any grantmaking panel would be 'bias-free' - a panellist raised that the point of having community panels is so that their 'biases' inform the decisions made - and in favour of organisations that are a part of their communities.

There is also a potential risk of conflict of interest as the grants team is providing pre-application support, while also chairing panel meetings. Through providing pre-application support, the grants team recalls feeling more responsible for an application and find themselves being less impartial when the application is being discussed. They also have more information about organisations that they have had previous interactions with - and sometimes panellists pick up on this and ask additional questions about what the organisation is like.

Recommendations:

- Continue the current good practices in place to mitigate unconscious bias.
- Continue to encourage panellists to be reflective of their decisions; remind panellists that there may be cultural, social or historical context to a piece of work that they find unnecessary or unimportant, and flag that the panel may be unconsciously bias towards the applicants with whom the Grants Team have had face-to-face contact with.

● **Staff capacity is limited:** One challenge that the grants team faces is limited capacity. One of the Grant Officer's roles is part-time, but it appears there would be no shortage of work if this became a full-time role. Working in a relational way, the grants team not only provides pre- and post-application support, but they are also maintaining one-to-one contact with all the panellists and coordinating panel meetings.

- Providing pre-application support is an important dimension of the fund which ensures its accessibility, but the grants team has to balance this with other tasks. Grants Officers recall providing over six hours of support for one application.
- Having limited capacity also means that communication gets delayed, which is noticed by some grantees. Additionally, although the grants team endeavours to provide feedback to all unsuccessful applicants, their limited capacity means that only those who actively ask for feedback are provided with it.
- The grants team did not anticipate how much time would be spent sifting through ineligible applications. Often, a lot of communication is required to establish whether an organisation meets the 'by and for' criteria. When applicants are turned down because they are ineligible, additional time is frequently spent on explaining why they are ineligible since the grants team is committed to providing feedback to everyone.

Recommendations:

- In future iterations of the fund, increase the grants team's capacity so they can provide timely pre- and post-application support, without putting their own wellbeing at risk.
- Explore time- and labour-saving tweaks to the application process - e.g. develop an online eligibility quiz which establishes whether an organisation is 'led by and for', putting the onus on the applicant.
- Set clear expectations to applicants around the level of detail that the grants team can realistically provide in pre-application support and feedback.

● **Interactions with applicants:** There were some reports that applicants were taking advantage of the softer interface and being very pushy, rude and even hostile when they didn't get funding. At the same time, panellists were mindful of the pressures on the Grants Team and some panellists were interested in working more directly with the applicants.

- While most interactions with applicants have been positive, there have been isolated incidents of people overstepping professional boundaries - such as bringing their frustration and bitterness about the sector into conversations with the Grants Team when they have not been awarded a grant. In these cases the Grants Team plays a role in maintaining a degree of separation to ensure that panellists are not implicated in interpersonal conflict.
- There were isolated incidents where applicants were disrespectful and antagonistic towards the Grants Team. In some cases, applicants clearly thought that they could change the outcome of the decision if they reached 'higher levels of management' - missing the fact that the final decisions rest with the Community Panellists, and that no Consortium staff would be able to affect the grant decision. To prevent this hostility, in external communications, the Grants Team had to change their job titles to convey a higher level of authority.
- Panellists are very invested in the applications they fund, and would like to stay updated on the progress of the grantees. Some proposed a presentation or a celebration at the end of the grant period.

- One of the panellists pointed out that their panel has, on several occasions, asked for additional information from an applicant multiple times. This not only adds additional work to the grants team, but also drains the capacity of grassroots organisations that may already be working with limited resources. One panellist even offered to meet with and interview applicants directly. Another also suggested that some applicants may prefer explaining their project in an interview if they have weaker application writing skills.

Recommendations:

- Enhance communications using small nudges:
 - Set firm boundaries that when an application has been unsuccessful, it has been unsuccessful, in communications with applicants - both at the outset and throughout any interactions discussing the application.
 - Remind unsuccessful applicants that Grants Team are not responsible for funding decisions in rejection letters.
 - Ensure that rejection letters also have a standard line expressing a zero tolerance policy to rudeness towards Consortium Grant Officers.
 - Consider asking applicants to agree to a “code of behaviour” upon submission, which prompts/nudges them to be respectful and thoughtful to the Grants Team, and to which the Grants Team can refer grantees if/when they fail to treat the Grants Officers appropriately.
- Explore and discuss these trends internally with the Grants Team.
- Consider hosting an event at the end of the grant funding period to celebrate the work of the grantees, panellists and the grants team, so that they can all meet!

Applications that address more than one intersection: When applications are submitted to more than one panel, there may be additional factors that influence the outcome. On page 7 of this report, graphs show that grants awarded from multiple panels are more likely to be altered from the original request (i.e. more or less than the original amount) than those submitted to a single panel.

- The additional intersection may lead to less informed decisions: For example, there is one incident of an application submitted to two panels that the Grants Team felt to not have been handled very well. Members of a panel had not fully understood the context of a community, and did not find the project proposed to be valuable; the panellist who existed at both intersections was not present that day to challenge these assumptions. Staff considered whether it was important to intervene: they felt that the decision was not handled well nor in the spirit of the fund, so they supported the applicant to re-apply. They also spoke to involved panel members to encourage them to be more reflective about their positionality.
- The group dynamic can be affected by the people present in the room - for example, if a panellist who had lived experience of multiple intersections was absent during a meeting, the decisions being made that day would not be informed from the additional intersectional perspective.

- Within each panel, there is still a risk that people with social privileges (e.g. race, gender, class) are more dominant in panel discussions and hold more influence over decisions made.
- When an application is submitted to more than one panel, the application is assessed by the panels separately. This means that if an application is submitted to two panels, each panel independently decides on whether to grant 50% of the amount requested.
 - From analysing grantmaking data, we found that applications submitted to multiple panels are more likely to be partially funded.
 - A panellist suggested that all panels that an applicant selects should meet together to make a decision. After all, intersectionality as a framework stipulates that axes of marginalisation cannot be treated as separate, and that overlapping identities combine to create different forms of marginalisation.
- Some panellists found that applications submitted to multiple panels to be less focused and more difficult to assess.
 - From speaking to grantees, this might be because it is more difficult to know what information to prioritise.
 - There are also occasions where panellists felt that their community of focus was not at the heart of the work; the applicant may have selected more panels because they believed that reaching more communities of focus leads to a higher chance of success.

Recommendations:

- In future iterations of the Equity Fund, consider how to develop a new system for assessing applications that address more than one intersection: when applications are relevant to more than one panel, involve panellists from all panels to make a decision together.
- It may be worth recommending applicants to submit to the panel that they feel their work is most relevant for if possible. Communications could emphasise that working with more communities of focus does not lead to a higher chance of success.

● More opportunities for team building and some guidance for panellists:

When asked what would improve their experience as community panellists, several interviewees pointed out that they would appreciate having more time to get to know each other as a team outside of the panel meetings when decisions are being made. Panellists have different levels of experience with reviewing grant applications, and having some general discussions around what to look out for in applications, what makes an application good and what they should be concerned about would be useful. It may also help to build cohesion if panels have this starting point to refer back to.

- Getting to know other panellists ahead of the panel meetings would also have been useful to understand each others' perspectives, experiences, and build shared understanding. It was particularly important for panellists on the two most diverse panels (the d/Deaf, disabled and neurodivergent panel and the People of

Colour panel) to understand the issues in each others' communities, in order to make informed decisions about the diverse array of applications that they received.

Recommendation:

- At the very start of the fund, set aside time for a 'training day' for panellists to get to know each other and brief them on the goals of the fund/their role.



Photo: The Black Boy Joy Club

8. Conclusion and discussion of next steps

Our findings show the synergistic nature of the Fund: The fund is working well for grantee organisations, the communities they serve, and people involved in making the fund a success. Although there are some modest changes that can enhance the fund, mostly, the opportunities for improvement that have been identified are emerging factors to consider if/when there is another round of the Equity Fund, or the model is replicated elsewhere.

It is important to emphasise this is the 'first of its kind', and its success/effectiveness is potentially influential and important as evidence that 'doing things differently' can work! Its success positions Consortium as a thought leader, which can influence mainstream funders to regard the funding of grassroots organisations as a priority, demonstrate the value of intermediary grantmakers and dispel misconceptions that equitable and inclusive processes are in any way out of reach. We (the CSC team) have identified a number of other considerations that can also guide Consortium on its way forward over the next 6-8 months, which are set out below.

From our side, as Consortium enters the second phase of the fund, CSC's next steps will be to work with the steering group to:

- **Develop impact metrics**, having now established a good understanding of what constitutes success/impact for grant recipients.
- Produce a final evaluation:
 - **Develop and disseminate the questionnaire** to establish progress against baseline survey results, and to collect impact metric data.
 - **Consult with grant recipients** in focus groups to further discuss successes and failures, and entry points for recommendations. These focus groups will also be an opportunity to collect impact data on the capacity development rolled out in the second phase. These group meetings will double-up as an opportunity for funded organisations to learn from and connect with one another.
 - **Evaluate the overall impact of the fund** and develop recommendations.
 - Consult with Consortium's National Lottery Funding Officer; **map out the success of the fund against the External Delegated Agreement** in place with The National Lottery Community Fund.

Summary of interim findings

48 grants have been awarded across geographies and communities of focus

- 48 grassroots lived experience organisations have been awarded £469,730
- There is a good geographic spread: though a large number of funded organisations are in London, this may not be disproportionate to the number of LGBT+ people living there (this has been noted by CSC for further investigation before the final report).
- Microgrants have been awarded, but a majority of the grants are medium and large (over £1000)

- There are various between panel trends - e.g. less funding has been awarded overall to *D/deaf, Disabled and Neurodivergent LGBT+ People* and *Older LGBT+ people*. (These trends have been noted by CSC for further investigation and to be reflected on with the grants team before the final report).

The equitable and inclusive funding mechanism is impacting intersectional communities

Thanks to the fund, 48 grantees are surviving, developing and/or experiencing a boost to their morale - a growing network of LGBT+ organisations is gaining momentum. The fund embodies a grantmaking structure which breaks down barriers for equity-led organisations who are best placed to support these communities who at the time experience structural disadvantage to access funding. As a result, the Equity Fund is making a considerable difference to intersectional communities: connecting people and communities (especially across generations); improving health and wellbeing (much of which is around identity, building social connection, reducing emotional loneliness); complementing gaps in overstretched public health service - and, but to a lesser extent advocacy (improved policy-making, improved service provision). Organisations feel the fund is for them, and benefit from the well-designed application process and relational support through it. They will appreciate more opportunities to connect with other people in the network, and more capacity-building.

The impact on intersectional communities is long-term

Panels understand the work and are impact oriented, long-termist and trusting of how grant is spent. They make informed funding decisions that are rigorous, appropriate (weighing up risk appropriately) and equitable - and they do so swiftly. This is a result of panellists' lived experiences, relevant sector experience and the diversity of both on each panel.

By fostering a long-termist, yet results-oriented culture – instead of the promise of immediate impact/outputs [which mainstream funders favour], there is a focus on the development of organisations. This is anticipated to lead to even greater impact in the long run – that will be experienced well beyond the funding period - and in turn builds trust between the funder and grantee organisations, because grantee organisations feel they are truly being invested in and trusted on their 'word'. This positive momentum should be sustained - i.e. the Equity Fund should continue.

Behind the scenes, this is credited to the grants team and panels being:

- Reflexive and accountable
- Collaborative decision-making
- Skillful, impartial facilitation and meditation
- Fostering a culture of flexibility and openness

The fund is synergistic

The Fund is truly participatory – it makes a difference to the individuals who are working to make the Equity Fund a success, as well as to the grantees being funded. For example individuals involved in the Equity Fund's community/lived experienced-led panels which make funding decisions reported it being a catalyst for professional and personal development. Though getting a lot from the experience, like the grantees panellists would value more

connection (e.g. team-building and contact with grantees) and some training/capacity development.

The fund is setting an example and showing what's possible

This evaluation has found that grassroots orgs are of inordinate value to intersectional communities and society as a whole, and the LGBT+ Futures: Equity Fund is demonstrating the feasibility and value of funding them. Small changes are recommended regarding:

- How to assess applications to more than one community of focus;,
- Communications with applicants;
- Increase the grant team's capacity.

In spite of these, this evaluation finds abundant evidence that the decision-making structure of the Community Fund – via the community panellists – is a winning model.

Further considerations

CSC has identified a number of **opportunities** and **threats**, based on our observations, which may help Consortium plan for the second phase of the funding period. These considerations have been developed having observed, listened, analysed data and developed recommendations - and drawing on our own experience delivering [Steps to Sustainability and Steps to Recovery](#) and our recent [research, with funders, into how grantmaking processes can be more equitable and inclusive](#) (with NPC). With the suggestion that they be considered in discussions ahead of 'phase 2' of this funding round or any future iterations of the Equity Fund, the opportunities and threats are reported below.

Opportunities:

- Because of its exceptional management of these funds, and its long history as an infrastructure charity, grantees and other stakeholders all have an excellent perception of Consortium. Consortium's assets present an entry point. Specifically:
 - **Authenticity:** Grantees feel like Consortium **genuinely cares**. Meanwhile, many grantees have had negative experiences in the past with other funders and infrastructure organisations, who may have felt used, ignored, or that they don't fit in with their expectations. Consortium has built **trust** with the community. People feel that Consortium wants to fund them - they don't feel like Consortium is trying to 'catch them out'.
 - **Credibility:** Consortium is **truly community-focused** and '**down with the people**' because the funding is only passing through them, it's not their money, and the community panellists are the ones distributing the resource. The panellists and the grants team are **extremely knowledgeable** about topical and relevant issues that affect the target communities. Also, because LGBT+ Consortium is a charity, they understand the challenges of being one.
 - **Efficiency:** Consortium is straightforward, grantees and members have clear expectations, and are paid quickly.

- **Approachable:** The grants team is approachable, and offers support before and after the application process.
- **Consortium have a ‘winning model’, and other funders will have a keen interest in the learnings and will want to replicate.** The Equity Fund’s design is truly serving its purpose as a participatory and community-led fund; it is an excellent model for funders who want to integrate more equitable funding mechanisms. From our research with NPC into how grantmaking processes can be made more equitable and inclusive, we know that there is a big appetite to improve funding mechanisms among funders. We also know that many funders have the perception that being equitable and inclusive comes at a high cost. In being a success, the Equity Fund is demonstrating that being equitable and inclusive doesn’t necessarily require more resources or slower processes - and generally provides a blueprint that other funders can follow. Even though Consortium’s Grants Team is operating with a very small team, both grantees and panellists have remarked on the responsiveness of the grant team and the timeliness of funding decisions. The panellists felt that they were slower at decision-making at the beginning of the funding period, but as they got to know the process and the job better, they could usually come to decisions very quickly. Some thoughts on how this could translate into opportunity:
 - Other mainstream funders that want to put money into LGBT+ communities would be advised to put this money directly into the Equity Fund - or work with Consortium on a similar basis.
 - Is Consortium filling the gaps in support that CVSes are supposed to be providing? It could be worth surveying grantees and Consortium members about how they feel using their local CVS and whether they have done so. If it emerges that LGBT+ grassroots organisations do not feel like their local CVSes are for them, there is a case to be made for local authorities to fund Consortium to do its LGBT+ voluntary community sector development work.
 - As the pioneer behind this successful fund, the fund is improving the LGBT+ community’s awareness and perception of The National Lottery Community Fund and Comic Relief.
- **This report creates an opportunity to organise a get together for LGBT+ Consortium’s members and funders**, as there is interest among both communities to hear about the fund’s progress so far. The findings could be presented to the funding community and funded organisations through a webinar - or via one of CSC’s coffee clubs! ([here](#)’s some information on one of our past coffee clubs).

We also note a number of **threats**:

- **Consortium has the challenge of advocating a diverse range of community-led organisations’ needs.** Although many of these organisations have found success on the Equity Fund, they may still face funders who don’t understand the importance of funding community-specific, intersectional projects - they require that funded activities are open to the ‘general’ community, rather than just the LGBT+ community. Each community of focus has a nuanced set of needs, which makes it challenging to distil one clear advocacy message.

- One universal message that CSC has noticed is that organisations led by and for communities will find a way to do the work whether they get the funding or not, because they are truly invested in their community. Unconsciously or not, this could be exploited by the Government, local authorities and society as a whole. Grantees verified this.
- **The Equity Fund is not ready to ‘be deleted’:** From The National Lottery Community Fund’s perspective, one of the goals of the Equity Fund is to lift grassroots LGBT+ organisations to a level where they can apply for mainstream funding, acting as a ‘stepping stone’. In this sense, it is a fund that is ‘made to be deleted’ - with The National Lottery Community Fund bringing all of the work currently being done by Consortium in house, once a new generation of organisations led by and for intersectional LGBT+ communities have been developed. However:
 - It may take more than one funding round to achieve this: even though they’re now being funded, grantees will continue to have limited capacity for investing in their own development (e.g. funding applications and relationship building). What’s more, some grantees worry that the simplified and accessible application process means that they are still not fully ready to meet a mainstream funder’s expectations.
 - Moreover, it is possible that the conclusions of this evaluation will suggest that intermediary grantmakers are irreplaceable - i.e. that Consortium’s ability to distribute funds to these organisations is unparalleled. From what we know so far, it is unlikely to be a simple case of all of the above listed capacities in-house: much of what Consortium is doing is inherently only feasible for an infrastructure organisation, which is ultimately not in charge of the budget envelope, and which is full of people with lived experience and passion for the LGBT+ community. CSC intends to carry out further analysis to identify the ‘active ingredients’ making the fund such a success, to understand which are inherent to Consortium as an intermediary/infrastructure organisation, and which are implementable for all funders.
- **Managing expectations:** Consortium has set a high bar of what’s possible, which has led to high expectations and ‘further to fall’. For example, one grantee suggested that future iterations of the Equity Fund could involve service users in decision-making too (as well as sector professionals as community panellists). This is an exciting idea, but suggests that grantees do not understand the constraints Consortium is working in. Working towards these goals will undoubtedly take time as the rest of the sector needs to catch up. Of even greater concern is that if the Equity Fund is discontinued, the disappointment could be profound, and it’s possible that one big step forward might be followed by two steps back.
- **Burnout:** The grants team is working under-resourced and over-capacity. Because they are committed to a relational way of working with applicants and panellists, the Grants Officers work very hard to provide timely and thoughtful communication, as well as comprehensive support for applicants. But this is often not possible with their workload. While the majority of applicants are considerate, there have been instances where people have been rude and hostile towards the Grant Officers when they have disagreed with the outcome of their application. As a result of the Grant Officers being

from the LGBT+ community themselves, they also receive a level of hostility and overstepping of professional boundaries that would be otherwise unlikely. The Grants Team are performing a high level of emotional labour, being very involved in some applications, and burnout is a real risk for staff.

Areas for further research/consideration

Below is a checklist of what CSC will be looking at ahead of the final report in Summer 2022:

- Impact metrics
- The 'active ingredients' behind Consortium's success - key features of Consortium that may be challenging for The National Lottery Community Fund to replicate.
- Data trends - especially between panels
- Capacity building - what's needed and what's the impact?
- Geographical spread - is London being disproportionately overrepresented? Do other regions that are less represented (e.g. the North East) need better outreach or less stringent selection criteria, for example?
- Alternative mechanisms for applications that address multiple communities focus
- How can this grantmaking structure be (a) publicised to mainstream funders, (b) made appealing to mainstream funders?
- How can we capture some beneficiary impact data/perspectives, within budget/time constraints?
- Investigate grant size:
 - What's the compromise between how many grants there are awarded (quantity) and the amount awarded to each one (quality)?
 - Any reasoning behind groups led by LGBT+women having lowest median grant size and LGBT+ people of colour having the most?
 - What have been the medium and longer term effects of additional and partial funding?
 - Investigate who is *not* being funded and the impact on them: collect evidence that the fund is successfully minimising its impact on unsuccessful applicants turned down for being ineligible; assess whether one of the Fund's primary claims stands (to build trust between funders and organisations, whether the application is successful or not).

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