

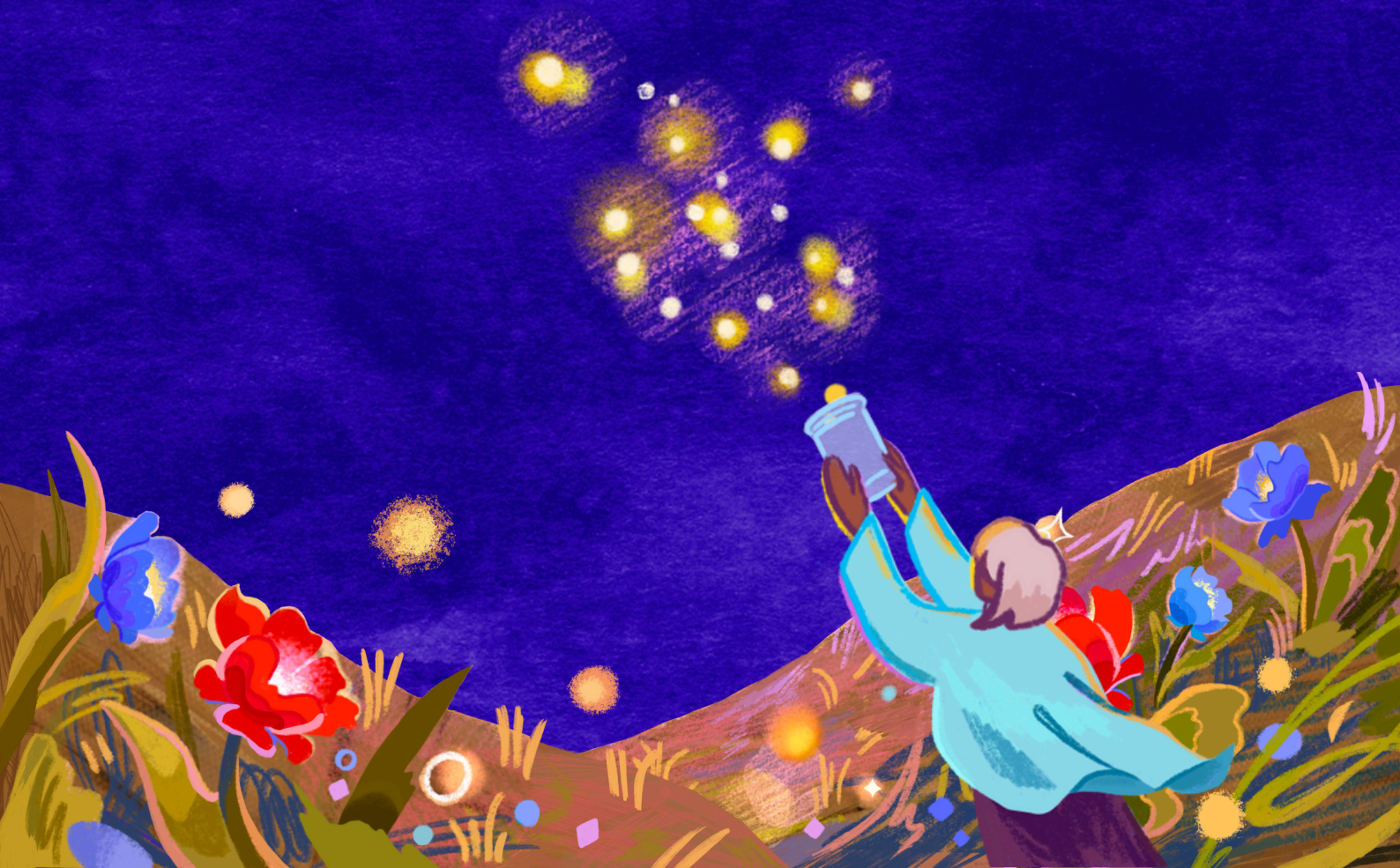


**National Survivor  
User Network**

# **SUSTAINING SPACES REFLECTIONS**

**REFLECTING ON NSUN'S 2022  
'SUSTAINING SPACES FUND'**

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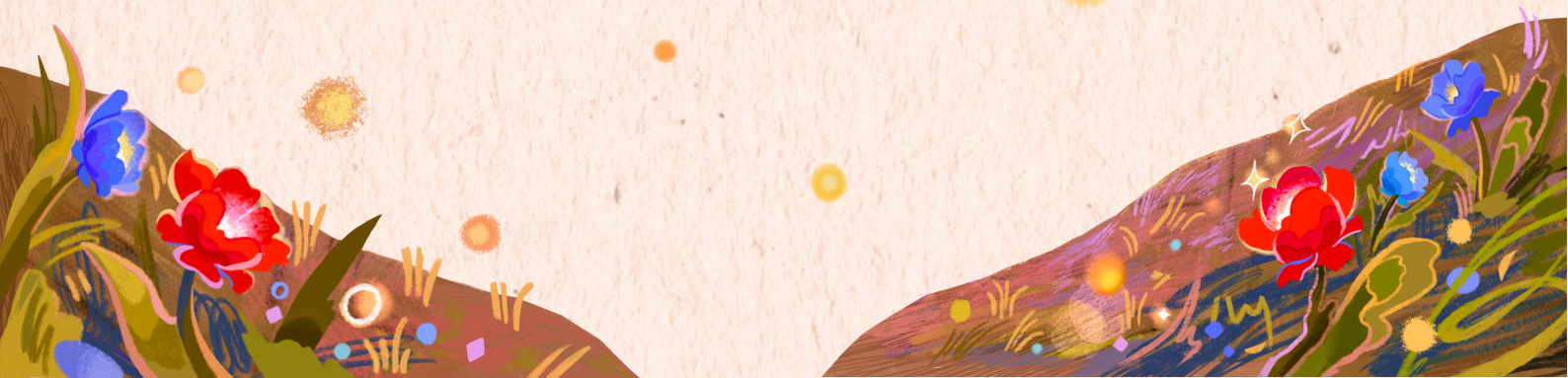
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# ABOUT THE FUND

The Sustaining Spaces Fund awarded 27 small grants of between £500-£1000, totalling £25,180, to groups facilitating community spaces where people with shared identities and experiences come together in support of one another's wellbeing.

The Fund was thanks to PeerFest, an annual celebration of peer support, and developed in collaboration with the PeerFest team. It was open to peer support, mutual aid or self-help groups, but was not limited to groups defining themselves in this way. We funded groups who are led "by and for" members of communities. These groups are sometimes called "user-led groups".

Much of this work, particularly amongst communities facing various forms of marginalisation and oppression, is being done in order to create safe, affirming spaces of connection and healing. This fund aimed to support the needs of those involved and the continuation of these spaces, whether local or online.

We prioritised applications from:

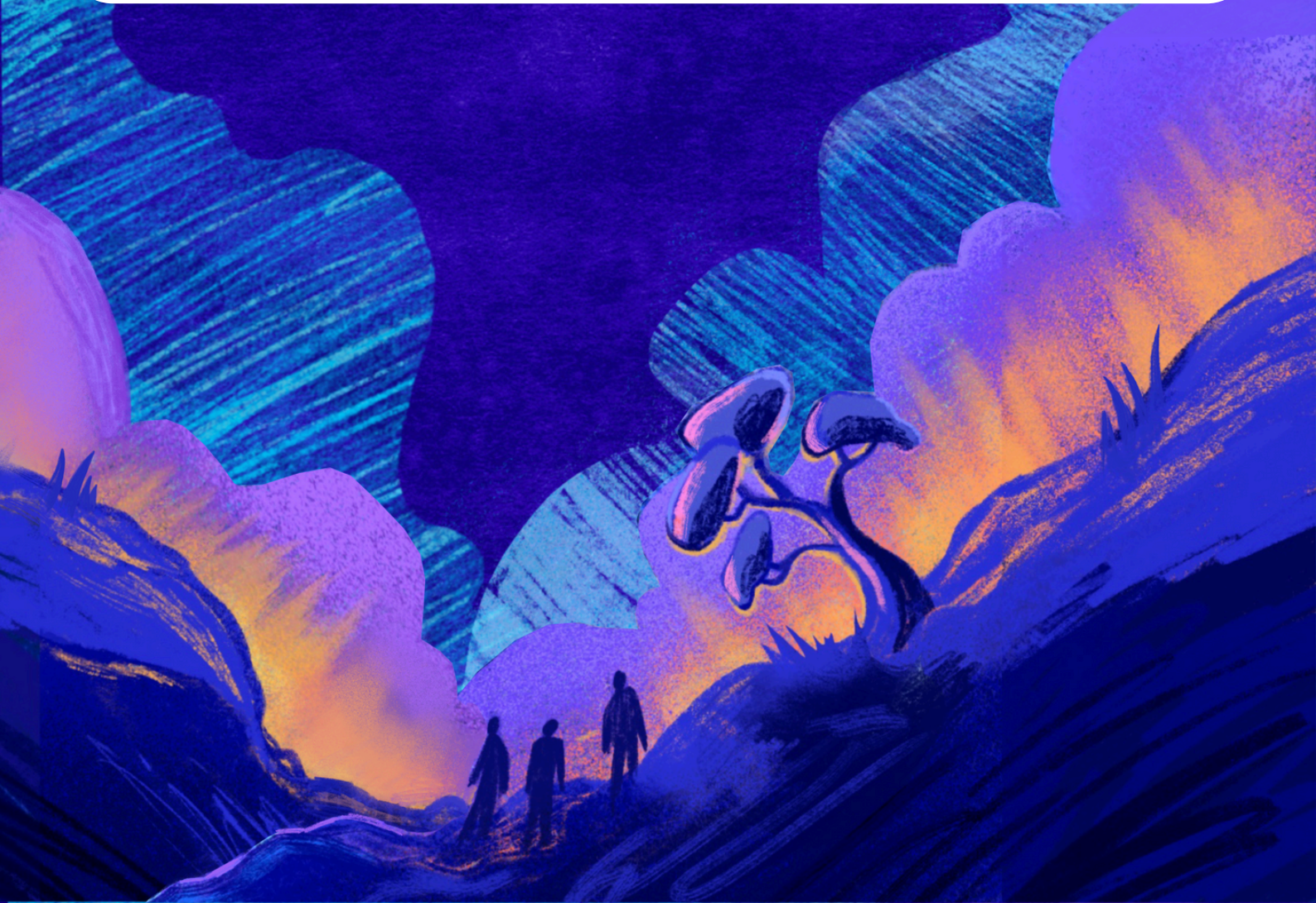
- Groups led by and for people from racialised communities/people of colour
- Groups led by and for young people (approximately defined as 18-25)
- Groups led by and for people from LGBTQ+ and QTIBPOC communities.

# WHO APPLIED

In total we received 152 applications from across England. Most represented were London (18%), North West (16%) and West Midlands (14%).

Of all applications, 42% were declared they were led by and for Black people and other people of colour, 32% were led by and for the LGBTQ+ community, and 38% were led by and for young people; 22% indicated they didn't meet any priority area. Many applicants indicated that they met more than one priority area.

These numbers come from what applicants told us in their applications; one issue we ran into was that sometimes applicants would indicate that they were 'by and for' a certain group but as we read more or discussed over the phone it became clear they were more 'for' than 'by'.



# WHO WAS SUCCESSFUL

You can see our [full list of grantees and information about their work here](#).

52% of grantee groups were led by and for Black people and other people of colour, 59% were led by and for the LGBTQ+ community and 26% were led by and for young people. We funded three groups which didn't fit directly within the priority categories.

Successful grantees were spread across England, but we didn't fund any groups in the East of England or the East Midlands. Grants were concentrated in London (26%), the North West (22%) and Yorkshire and the Humber (22%).

# WHAT DIFFERENCE DID THE GRANTS MAKE?

Roz of Mix Up described their group as, "like you have friends sitting down in your living room and talking." This captures the closeness and the informality of the groups we funded, and also some of the difficulties – while these groups need resources to continue, funding practices can disrupt their routines and ways of working.

When we spoke to grantees, we heard about a lot of different impacts. Some of these impacts were on a group level – relating to the sustainability, learning and organisation of the group itself – and some of the impacts were the differences that that groups made for their members.

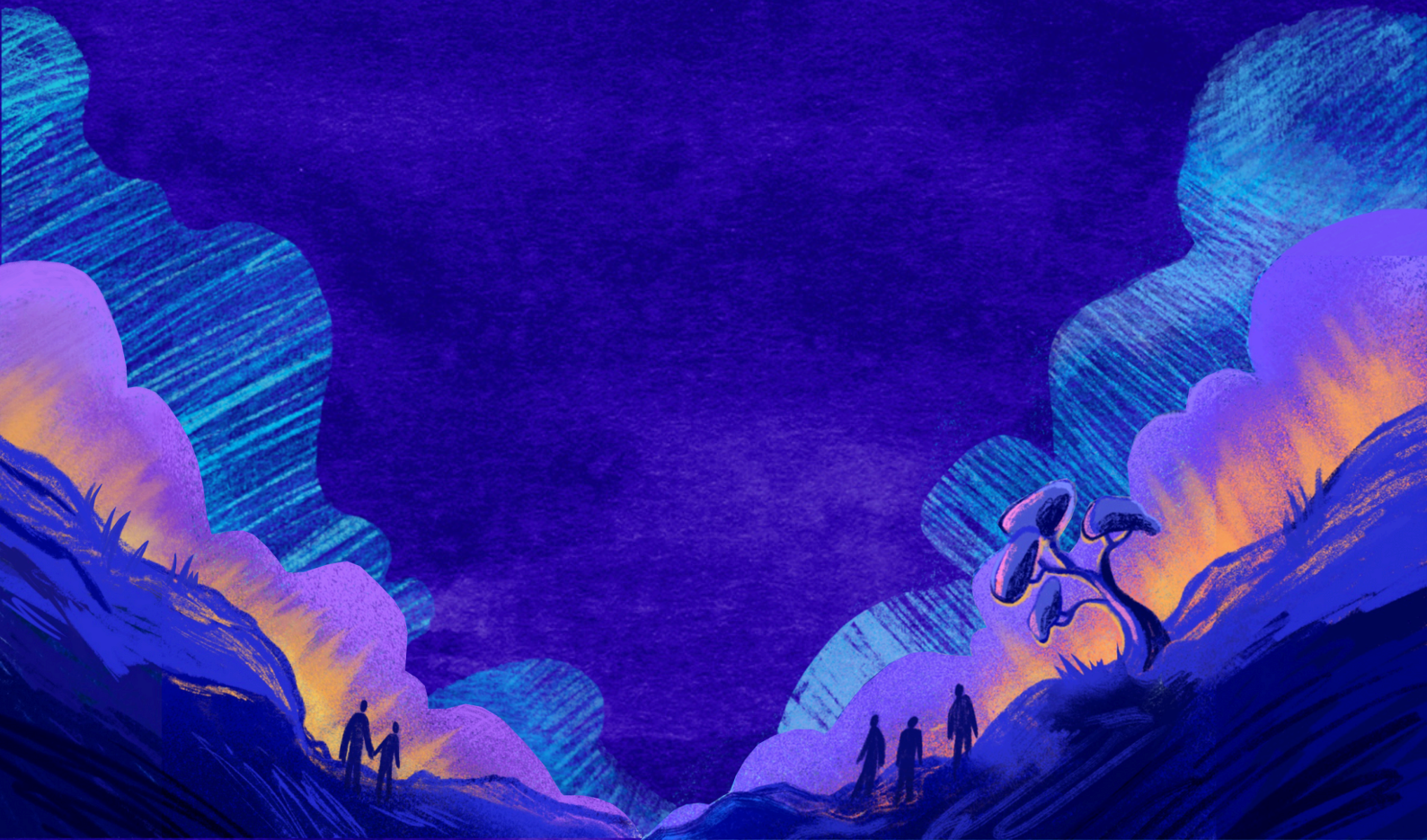
## Sustainability and time

“If we hadn't had it we wouldn't have been able to continue.” – Milcah Chisale, Together As One

'Keeping going has been a big thing and the grant kept us going.' – Barney Griffin, Be Active Recovery Group

Grantees stressed that the flexibility of the funding was really helpful. Many used the money for essential things that would outlast the grant spending period, like furniture, equipment or digital infrastructure. Access to funding for the 'basics' was described as particularly difficult; this was true even for larger organisations.

Having a small amount of funding meant that groups had a little more space and time to focus on delivering their work. This was also helped by the light touch reporting, which didn't require extensive documentation.



# CASE STUDY

## LEARNEST CIC – GETTING THE BASICS SORTED

Learnest has been building a community space from ‘pretty much nothing’, and the Sustaining Spaces grant helped them make it practical and comfortable. They bought new equipment including furniture, a projector and screen and crockery: they had been finding it difficult to get funding for basic items such as these, and so the Sustaining Spaces grant eased this burden and allowed Learnest to focus on other work such as organizing events instead of fundraising.

They have used the projector screen to showcase art installations, including a mural created by an artist in the community. It has also been useful for screening trainings and short films, and the seating Learnest purchased is used every day in the space.

Louie of Learnest said, “We need to be able to build spaces so we can actually hold groups. This background equipment is really important because we use it every day. When you can get a little pot of funding it frees you up.”

When we spoke to Learnest, they were on the cusp of launching a crowdfunding campaign to increase their sustainability.



Jessica of STAR (Stand Together and Recover) also found that the grant gave the organisation the space they needed to find other avenues of funding: “We only have 4 volunteers and the funding is all down to me which can be really stressful...£1000 for rent was a huge relief and we've been able to focus on getting more money.” They raised £1,400 to renovate their garden and allotment ready for the summer. Jessica said that the impact of the grant was “positive and relaxing”.

In many cases, funding meant that groups were no longer self-funded by their founders, facilitators or through member donations. For instance, the funding meant that Be Active Recovery Group weren't financing the group themselves, so they could do more and more people could join.

## CASE STUDY

### GIRLS AGAINST ANXIETY - FUNDING MEANS GROWTH, BUT THEN WHAT?

The funding kept Girls Against Anxiety going, and during the grant lifetime their membership increased from 30 to 50. The funding gave the group the freedom to do a wider range of activities and workshops, make them more accessible, and learn new skills and ways of thinking. They ran a workshop for people living with long-term pain which was described as really helpful and empowering. They also had a workshop with a queer hairdresser where attendees were able to talk about their struggles and insecurities, and left “beaming with confidence”.

“A lot of people come in scared to share parts of themselves in fear of judgement but in this space they are able and encouraged to do that. They're okay here. ... Funding pushes us to do other activities. It's hard to ask people to do workshops when you don't have the funding to pay them.”



## **Learning**

Some groups told us that the process of applying was a useful learning process. Others found that in the course of using the grant, they had to develop new ways of working and collaborating.

For instance, Joshi of GIN LGBTQ+ Network explained that he uses some of what he spoke about and refined during the application process to brief new members, and other people hearing about GIN for the first time, saying, “It’s helped GIN to be strategic and communicate about its work.”

This group development was also named by Proud North London, a group of young LGBTQ people. Applying for and receiving the grant “meant the group had to work together, learn about the process of getting grants, and think about the future of the group.” Young people in the group collaborated on deciding what to use the funding for, and built a community make-up chest to share.

## **Emotional impacts**

People we spoke to described feelings of “relief”, “safety” and “security”. This feels linked to the context of the work we’re funding: where groups were able to offer more sustainable spaces for people to connect, the work of bringing communities together is easier and people can relax.

Grantees also spoke about how their work had built people’s confidence, connections and sense of pride. One young person who was part of Rotherham Wellness and Wellbeing Through The Arts said, “Calling this a second home would be an understatement.” At SAYiT (Sheela Amos Youth Trust), the money was used to allow young people to decide on the décor and equipment for their new permanent youth space – simple things like painting rainbow flags and being able to store things easily created a sense of continuity and safety. Compassionate Cuppa’s “safe, special and non-judgmental” spaces allowed people to connect with each other, process feelings and share stories. At Borashabaa Refugee Community Organisation, the grant created opportunities for cross-generational sharing, support and learning.

# WHAT CHALLENGES DID GRANTEES FACE?

## Funding

There's never enough funding, and finding ways of raising money is a huge additional burden on people's time and energy. Applying for funding was often felt to be intimidating and inaccessible, and some groups described their work as being hard to fund – for instance, Amneet of Sheffield Maternity Cooperative/Communities of Cultures, who were delivering events about Islam and reproductive justice, said it had been difficult to find funders who appreciated the need for this work.

Other groups find their access to funding limited by their legal structure and their approaches. The founder of WOC Azadi, Ishah, shared, "As a grassroots group that has chosen to not become a charity, we have very limited funds available to us, and support from NSUN who understand the politics of our work has been really valuable."

The funding that we were able to offer was small and time-limited. In some cases, groups were able to increase their activity for a time, then had to scale back their work afterwards. A common refrain was that groups had far more that they wanted to do, which they weren't able to do with the amount we could offer.

## Current context

The groups we funded named the cost of living crisis, energy crisis and pressure on the NHS as issues which meant that people were not only struggling in worse conditions and needing more support, but also that they had less time to engage with their communities to give and receive that support. LGBTQ+ groups named anti-trans movements in UK politics and media as being seriously harmful to people's mental health, especially young people.

These contextual factors impact the people running organisations as well as people who attend them (and in some cases there may not be clear distinctions between the two). As well as increasing people's need for support, they squeeze the availability of that support.

### **Varying attendance & accessibility of support**

Some groups named that attendance varied, particularly over winter when people were less likely to come to physical groups. This was often due to members' struggles with their mental health, the cost of living, and supporting their families or having carer responsibilities. This also made it harder to plan activities for some groups.

## **WHAT WAS OUR PROCESS?**

We developed our process alongside two PeerFest consultants, Clare Ockwell and June Sadd, and based on feedback from our previous grants programmes (the Covid Fund and Side By Side Fund).

Applicants submitted a short online application. Two grants officers sifted through applications and created a shortlist, then arranged 30-40 minute calls with all shortlisted applicants to gather more information. Notes from these calls and the original applications then went to our decision-making panel, who included representatives from PeerFest, and people with lived experience relevant to our priority areas. The panel met weekly and made decisions on a rolling basis.

Afterwards, we sent out feedback surveys looking for feedback on the process of applying to all applicants. After grants had been spent, we arranged a second call with all successful grantees to hear about the work they'd done.

# WHAT DID APPLICANTS THINK OF THE PROCESS?

## **The written application was easier than most**

We received a lot of feedback via the surveys, review calls and in other conversations which emphasised that the light-touch process was effective at reducing the burden on groups and making the grants programme attractive: “It was a very straightforward application process and not overly intensive in terms of information required which made the application process much less daunting.” (anonymous survey respondent) We succeeded in making the written application relatively quick: no applicant who responded to the feedback survey reported spending more than 6 hours on it, with most spending less than 2 hours writing.

## **Fact-finding calls before panel decisions made the process easier**

Survey respondents described the conversations as ‘helpful’, ‘conversational’, ‘relaxed’, ‘friendly but professional’, ‘easy’, ‘simple’, ‘straightforward’ and ‘non-threatening’. Many applicants felt that the process offered more of a chance for them to adequately describe their work, as well as giving them an insight into NSUN’s priorities and approach: “The interview encouraged interesting and positive reflection on various aspects of our organisation. I appreciate the values and priorities reflected in the questions, compared to other grant applications I've filled in the past.” (anonymous survey respondent) However, some applicants noted that it meant investing more time, that more clarity around the purpose of the call would be welcome, and that specific feedback after a rejection should be offered as standard.

## **Review calls worked better than lengthy reporting forms**

At the end of the grants period, NSUN scheduled brief review calls with grantees to hear about the impacts of the grant, any challenges they’d faced, and any feedback on the process they wanted to share. This was mostly received very positively, and seen as part of the friendly and conversational process. Some grantees weren’t able to schedule these calls, so we asked the same questions via email.

# KEY TAKEAWAYS

## **Time is everything – don't make people spend what they haven't got**

Having a brief written application and minimal reporting requirements made the process of applying and receiving the grant much more accessible for groups, especially those running on a voluntary basis. The grant also gave people time by briefly taking the pressure off and allowing them to refocus their energies.

## **Keep it conversational**

Prioritising conversations and connections in our grants processes meant that applicants felt the process was friendly and accessible, and that their work was understood. It also took the onus off written communication, which some applicants felt made the process a lot easier and more personable.

## **Small interventions have long-term impacts, but wider change is needed**

The funding offered groups space and time to continue and develop their activities, as well as creating intangible benefits like opportunities, connection and stronger support networks. Many groups used the money for essential things that would outlast the grant spending period, like furniture, equipment or digital infrastructure, and some found that the process of applying for and using the grant was a useful learning exercise in and of itself.

However, small grants are still small, and these groups are continually being put under more and more pressure through increasing demand and diminishing capacity. Larger amounts are necessary in order to develop long-term sustainability for these groups. This also requires that funders understand the impacts that user-led groups have and the unique roles they play in their communities.



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