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LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF HEALTH

NOVA THINKING DIFFERENTLY FUND: FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

Abstract

This report presents evaluation findings about the NOVA Thinking Differently Fund. The evaluation data includes delivery staff and stakeholder perspectives about the work, gathered from interviews and case study evidence of mental health impacts.

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Centre for Health Promotion Research, October 2024

NOVA Thinking Differently Fund

1. Background

NOVA and Wakefield’s Mental Health Alliance implemented a pilot funding programme (Thinking Differently Fund) to support 5 VCSE organisations to work towards a more sustainable future. Five organisations were selected to be involved in the pilot and funded for 2 years (2022-2024):

- Wakefield & District Society for Deaf People (Tier 2¹)
- Five Towns Christian Fellowship (Tier 2)
- Evergreen Active CIC (Trading as Family Fit Yorkshire CIC) (Tier 3)
- Turning Minds Around (Tier 3)
- West Yorkshire ADHD Support Group (Tier 3)

The programme offered grant funding as well as tailored support that focused on long-term plans, sustainability, evidencing outcomes, and the alignment of these VCSE organisations to the evolving local community mental health offer.

2. Methods

The aim of our evaluation was to assess the funding programme using a people-centred approach, documenting learning about the outcomes of the pilot. The evaluation was conducted in two phases, and focused on gathering data to document:

- The impact of each funded project, capturing evidence of mental health outcomes
- The outcomes associated with the tailored support
- Partnership learning and organisational development

Table 2.1 – Summary of evaluation data gathering

Phase 1 – Year 1 of funding	Phase 2 – Year 2 of funding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of internal development plans comparing November 2022, May 2023 (6 months after funding) and September 2023 (1 year after funding). • Staff and stakeholder perspectives, gathered through semi-structured interviews (n=8) conducted in April-May 2023. <p>See Warwick-Booth, L. & Coan, S. (2023) <i>Nova Thinking Differently Fund: Interim Evaluation Report</i> November 2023 Leeds Beckett University, Leeds.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 case studies detailing impact of the funding (at organisational level and/or service user level). • Staff and stakeholder perspectives, gathered through semi-structured interviews (n=8) conducted in June-July 2024.

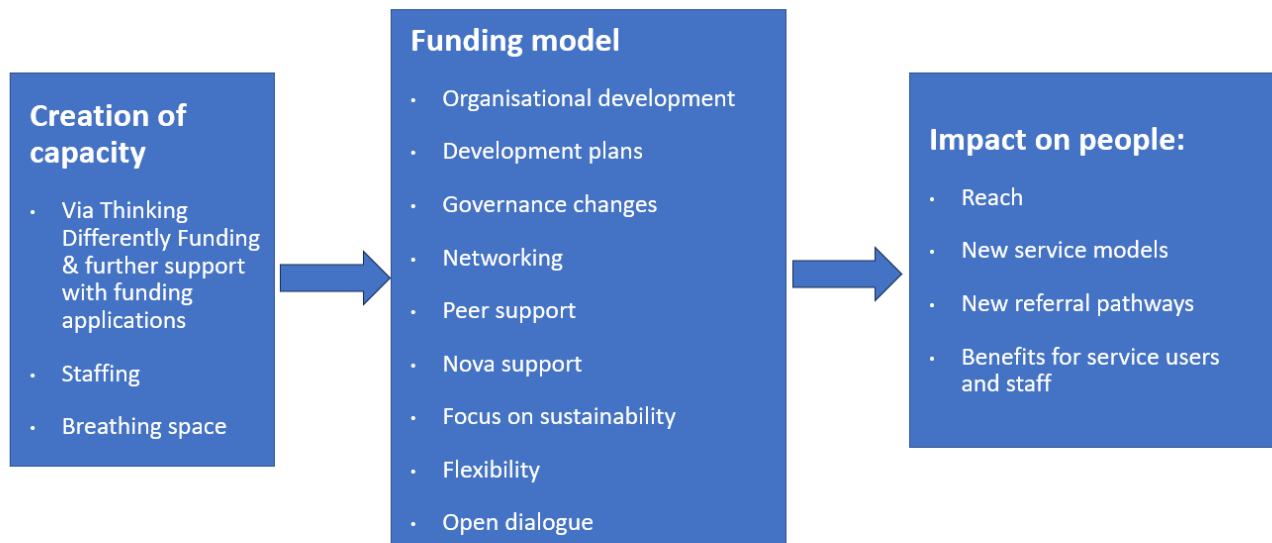
¹ Tiers here refer to the size of grants held by organisations, as well as their experience of managing contracts, and grant funds. Tier 3 are smaller organisations in terms of income, as well as with development needs around governance and quality assurance, for example.

This report presents data from phase 2 of the evaluation. Five delivery staff members, and three stakeholders consented to take part in interviews, discussing their views about Thinking Differently. Interview questions focused on changes since year 1 data gathering, mental health impacts, learning, and suggestions for improvements.

Ethical approval was granted through university procedures. We obtained informed consent from all staff and stakeholders, who were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, so no personal identifying information is used in our reporting; anonymised quotations, pseudonyms and generic labels distinguish participants according to their involvement in the pilot. We securely managed all data through password protected university systems in accordance with GDPR.

3. Findings - staff and stakeholder interview discussions

Figure 3.1. Overview of the Thinking Different Fund approach and its impact



What the funding was used for

The funding was used to cover staff costs; training; marketing; a range of activities including educational support, counselling, youth work, physical activity groups, men’s groups, coffee clubs; and some practical costs to improve premises or cover overheads.

Capacity and breathing space

The funding has given organisations space to think about the direction of their work, to take a step back from the day-to-day delivery, and to build relationships:

“It’s given us capacity to have, the fund has given us a bit of breathing space as well to have conversations with different stakeholders.” [Funded organisation 1]

The funding increased capacity by paying for additional staff members, bringing volunteers into paid roles and paying for training to upskill employees and volunteers. However, the phrase ‘victims of their own success’ came up in a number of interviews (3) where demand for the organisations increased beyond their capacity as their offer increased and was marketed more widely:

“I think the biggest change for us has been demand. You know, we’re now struggling. We have to have a team meeting and say, right, this is what we’re funded for. This is what we’re going to deliver everything outside it, we can’t do it anymore. There’s not enough of us and there’s too many people needing us.”
[Funded organisation 2]

Development Planning

The organisations found the Development Plan they produced at the beginning of the two years and the quarterly meetings to be invaluable. Setting that time aside for reflection which also included professional facilitation helped the organisations to navigate challenges and make adjustments as they progressed.

The strategic planning at the start of the funding has supported the groups to understand where they were, where they wanted to be and how to get there. The ongoing guidance from Nova also allowed them to reflect on adjustments that needed to be made along the way when things didn’t go to plan. Several of the organisations had experienced considerable change over the funding period, in some cases staffing changes that had not been anticipated and in others, there had been a significant expansion of their offer because of the funding. However, in general, the core elements they included in their development plans were still underpinning their progress, and had been useful in areas such as board development and safeguarding:

“We did a business plan...It’s been a great learning curve for myself.” [Funded organisation 3]

Staffing

The organisations experienced significant staffing changes over the course of the funding period. One lost fulltime members of staff which resulted in a change of approach to use sessional workers. This unanticipated change meant that they could be much more flexible and the sessional workers brought a range of additional skills. In another organisation, they were able to bring on another fulltime member of staff which was partly down to the additional funding, but also the confidence to do so which came about because of the Nova support. A third organisation was able to fund more staff and also redesigned some of the roles to support sustainability.

Volunteers

Recruiting volunteers was more challenging for some organisations than others. There were a number of examples from different organisations of service users becoming volunteers, and in some cases then moving on to other opportunities because of the skills and the confidence they had gained. Several charities lost dedicated volunteers because they moved on to other opportunities. Whilst this was a very positive outcome for the individuals, organisations needed to recruit and train new volunteers to replace those leaving.

The organisations employed reward and recognition approaches to support retention of their volunteers, for example, providing quality external training, having thank you events or social outings, and small gestures such as gift vouchers.

Funding model

The organisations appreciated the flexibility of the funding and the reporting approach, which was more relational and reflective as opposed to burdensome and bureaucratic. The freedom to develop with secure

funding and guidance from Nova and their peers meant that organisations could genuinely *Think Differently* and adapt their approach to meet existing and emerging demand:

“We have got that security and we we know that's there, we know it's happening and again the unrestricted elements of it allows us to adapt to what our current situation is. If it was [...] quite fixed in what we could do, if we'd probably have been, it would have just been another delivery, yeah, it would be really difficult for us to adapt.” [Funded organisation 4]

Whilst funded organisations welcomed the accountability, not just to Nova, but to the other funding recipients as well, stakeholders acknowledged that the fluid nature of the funding made it difficult for them to trace its use, and indeed impact:

“It's flexible funding. It's designed to kind of fill in the gaps and not have such clear kind of parameters, but then it's very difficult to know what that's been used for.” [Stakeholder 1]

There was a general consensus that the essential components of the funding model were flexibility, the open dialogue and the peer support. Peer Support provided significant added value to the funding. The organisations learnt from each other and the small number of groups funded meant that they formed close connections and felt safe talking about challenges and areas of weakness:

“I do get good feedback on the peer sessions.” [Stakeholder 1]

“They're doing it [delivering work] in an extended family. So they've got more people who are able to share...Every time we've come together... somebody has had something that they've shared that has helped somebody else.” [Stakeholder 2]

“That kind of that peer sharing has been really valuable and things I've learnt from them things. Hopefully they've learnt from us.” [Funded organisation 1]

“The partnership we've got now is strong...the networking means we're not isolated, we've got somebody we can ring.” [Funded organisation 3]

The only area that was highlighted for improvement was contact with the funder. Several organisations felt disappointed that there hadn't been direct contact with the Mental Health Allowance. They would appreciate feedback on how the funding had been used to help their development and if the feedback was positive, this could be used in applications to other funders. The experience from the different organisations in working with different populations (sometimes considered 'hard to reach') could also feed into future work the Mental Health Alliance do.

Governance

Less well-established organisations benefited greatly from advice and guidance on governance such as how to recruit trustees/board members and having the appropriate policies in place. This helped to strengthen their case for future funding applications and new trustees/directors brought additional skills and experience to develop their work. The more established organisations received support to clarify roles and responsibilities of trustees, and to offer them training. In one of these organisations, the trustees needed a bit more time to start *Thinking Differently* but progress was being made with Nova advisors on hand if their input was needed.

“Finding a way to invest in organisational development across the VCSE sector could show some significant value for health and well-being outcomes...particularly for the organisations that were less

mature... who are now talking in confidence about having their governance arrangements set up and sorted.” [Stakeholder 2]

Impact

Health and Wellbeing

The organisations reported improved mental health and general wellbeing in many people they engaged with [see case studies]. In some instances, service user outcomes were also reported:

“He [client] always says well, [named organisation] saved my life. But he saved his life. He fought his way out of that awful position he was in.” [Stakeholder 3]

Wellbeing impacts were also linked to the provision of activities such as crafting with vulnerable adults, physical activity sessions for men, providing community members with access to free/cheap food and delivering classes on healthy cooking.

Networking and partnerships

Networking had led to some referrals and collaborations between the funded organisations:

“The [named] group is invaluable as we made a partnership with them, where we have a joint referral service.” [Funded organisation 3]

Some partnership work developed between the funded organisations in areas where their work was complementary and future collaborations were being planned. The support from Nova allowed them to be well networked across the region as well, so partnerships had developed in the wider VCSE sector:

“Most organisations exist in their own bubble... there’s very little opportunity for those organisations, leaders of those organisations, to actually break out of their walls.” [Stakeholder 2]

“One of the other things we’re looking at is potentially getting commissioning either from ICBS or local authorities because we do work essentially for them. We get a lot of referrals from schools, from local authorities...if we’re picking up their work, why are we not being funded for it?” [Funded Organisation 2]

Reach

Increased capacity through having more paid staff time and volunteers meant that more people could be supported through services or included in activities. The funding also allowed some organisations to work in different geographical areas and to reach different demographics e.g. different age groups and ethnic groups:

“One of the other organisations has extended its geographical scope beyond the small locality that they were working in... another has started doing some group sessions rather than it all being on a one to one basis.” [Stakeholder 2]

Several of those interviewed raised the challenge of engaging people, especially post-pandemic. Improved marketing and use of technology helped to overcome this to some degree.

Sustainability

Thinking Differently has supported sustainability by funding:

- High quality work which then drew the attention of other funders/commissioners
- A broadening of the organisations’ offers, strengthening them by not relying on one stream of work

- Support with applications for other sources of funding
- Support with governance and management
- Development planning – so the organisations planned expansion etc. in a strategic way.
-

The organisations felt they were in a more stable position with a plan for what to do next:

“They’ve all diversified their income streams, even if only marginally for some of them.” [Stakeholder 2]

All of the organisations feel better prepared for the future as a result of the funding, although they also acknowledged that the landscape was still very challenging:

“We are currently very realistic... funding takes a long time to get. So we’re at that point of going, Oh my God, let’s try and get some bids in...and get a bit of a fundraising strategy plan.” [Funded Organisation 2]

There were also sustainability challenges attached to being *victims of their own success* for some organisations, where demand far outstripped capacity. They had to consider how to ensure they don’t stretch themselves too thinly going forward which could affect the quality of the provision and their reputation.

“Some of the work we’ve done through this project has raised our profile and in terms of what we do and suddenly you then get people saying, ‘oh, can you deliver this, can you, have you got capacity for us to come and do that or do this’ but then having the bravery to actually say no, we just can’t at the moment. Or give us some money, we will do” [Funded Organisation 1]

After the funding ends

In general, they were keen to continue to network and potentially incorporate some of the reflective practice from this project into other network meetings. For one organisation, merging with another/other organisations could be the solution that offers sustainability in the long term. In their view, more small charities should consider merging with others focusing on the same issue so that they will all have more stability and not be duplicating work and competing for scarce funding. If the funding was run again, project representatives speculated that it could be scaled up, so that larger amounts would enable organisations to deliver more. However, they agreed that 5 recipients of funding was a good number for the quarterly meetings because it allowed them to get to know each other.

Nova Support

Nova kept in regular contact with the organisations so they knew that support was always available to offer anything from acting as a sounding board to providing advice on governance or funding applications. They helped the organisations with practical challenges, such as finding appropriate premises, as well more complex organisational, legal and financial responsibilities, such as setting up boards of directors. Where there was the need for expertise that the team didn’t have, they brought in external support:

“They [Nova] are kind of always there, like [staff name] sent us a link for a fund. So having that is a positive thing, although it is another demand on time as well.” [Funded organisation 2]

“Nova are amazing. We wouldn’t have got set up without Nova. Nova set the CIC up with us they gave us countless support.” [Funded organisation 3]

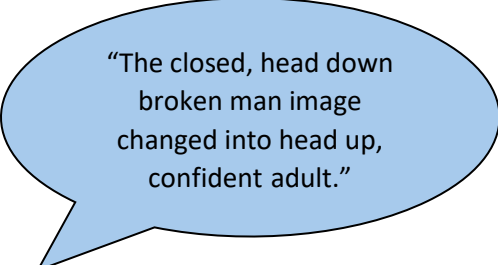
“It’s been fantastic. The whole team at Nova for for everything are fabulous. [...] we know that that they’re at the end of an e-mail.” [Funded Organisation 4]

The organisations appreciated the consistency of the support and staff and valued their expertise and connections across the region. The more established organisations didn't need the same level of support around setting up governance but did benefit from advice on their existing structures and how they could be strengthened.

4. Findings – case study evidence

Case Study A

Sam had been experiencing anxiety and depression due to relationship issues. His mental ill health had also caused physical symptoms such as weight loss. The **Thinking Differently** funding meant that Sam could receive counselling within 5 weeks of referral. Without the funding he would have had a wait of up to seven months to see a mental health advisor and this support would not be carried out by a qualified psychotherapist. He attended 8 weekly therapy sessions which supported him to grow in confidence and increase his self-worth.



“The closed, head down broken man image changed into head up, confident adult.”

Sam credited the therapy with getting him to a position where he was looking for new employment and for the first time in many years, he believed he had the confidence to move forward. At the end of the 8-week period, Sam was ready to be discharged with no need for further referrals.

Case Study B

Gary got in touch with the organisation through their social media page to ask about joining a physical activity group. He was nervous and lacked confidence because he hadn't done any exercise for years. He said that he felt unfit, and he was overweight. He was assured he would be very welcome at the group and supported, but he found excuses not to attend and then stopped messaging. After a further prompt from the group leader a few weeks later, Gary joined a session.

The **Thinking Differently Fund** allowed the group leader to complete the Mental Health and Exercise Coaching Award programme (MHEC) in 2023 which teaches coaches to use physical activity as a way to help improve mental health as well as for physical strength and fitness. Using the MHEC techniques, the group leader encouraged Gary to open up to him, whilst running! He disclosed recent trauma and was a now lone parent to a teenager.

The organisation aims to help people to enjoy movement first and foremost, and any subsequent weight loss and increased fitness levels are a bonus. They have seen that being active in group settings engenders a feeling of being a part of something positive and can reduce feelings of isolation, loneliness and negativity.

Gary has found running to be an outlet for stress relief as well as benefiting his physical health and contributing to significant healthy weight loss. He has met friendly, supportive people though running with the group which motivates him to turn up even on days where he doesn't feel great.

The group is unique in the area because of the added layer of mental health support and they are well connected with appropriate services if Gary or others need to be signposted for further support.

Case Study C

Deaf people have poorer mental health than the general population and there are still significant inequalities in accessing health services. A small local organisation recognised they had limited opportunity to influence substantial change at policy level, but they could have a big impact through taking a community approach in the support they provide.

The **Thinking Differently Fund** paid for staff members that allowed for a change in the leadership of this organisation which resulted in a shift in emphasis from equipment provision to support work. From the first year to the second year of funding, support work contacts increased from 95 to 251.

A funded staff member managed the production of 10 information videos on the theme of mental health. They were delivered in BSL with captions focussing on stress, sleep, loneliness, alcohol, anxiety and parenting.

Thinking Differently meant that they could deliver a cost-of-living crisis fund to 12 individuals. The fund has supported the organisation to continue to advocate for Deaf/deaf/hard of hearing people, to raise awareness about the exclusion they experience and educate services about how to best meet their diverse needs.

Case Study D

Ken had a history of street homelessness, addiction, shoplifting and antisocial behaviour. A homeless charity supported him into accommodation, and he began to attend a group for vulnerable adults once a week funded by **Thinking Differently** at another community organisation.

Ken received support from the two organisations and as a partnership, they helped him get back on his feet. He is now working and also volunteering with the community organisation. He has a fresh outlook on life and is unrecognisable from when first contact was made.

The **Thinking Differently** fund provided extra capacity to be able to work in partnership with other organisations and to establish new projects. This has led to people like Ken receiving greater assistance resulting in better life outcomes, improved mental health and reduced isolation through being part of a community.

The funding also helped the community organisation to identify some priorities and gave them space to reflect on: *"who we are, what we do and how we can increase our impact in our local community"*.

Without the intervention that took place for Ken, it's highly likely that he would have gone to prison and continued to move through the revolving door of the criminal justice system.

They will keep working with Ken as long as he needs them and hope that he will carry on volunteering with them to further increase his independence.

Case Study E

The **Thinking Differently** fund provided extra capacity for staff in this organisation. Karen, a 48 year-old woman, attended a peer support group for ADHD following a recent diagnosis of ADHD. Her son, Finlay, had also been diagnosed with ADHD and was being assessed for autism. She was anxious, isolated and struggling to manage her son's behaviour. She had no local family support so she and her husband had no respite when they could recharge.

She felt safe, accepted and relaxed in the peer support groups and found it helpful to speak to others in the same situation. She took Finlay to Saturday morning sessions for children where they both made good friends in a non-judgemental environment. Karen felt much less isolated, and Finlay was happy to be around other children like him.

The sessions have given Karen a lot of new knowledge about ADHD which she has been able to share with her family and friends to help them to understand Finlay's needs. The charity has supported Karen with action to get the support Finlay needs from school and the Local Authority that she wouldn't have been able to do alone. Finlay has now been offered a place at an appropriate school and is excited to start.

Without this support, Karen believes Finlay would not have been able to receive an education and she would have continued to be isolated with poor mental health because she had to be with him 24 hours a day.

Karen has grown in confidence and is now a much-valued volunteer for the charity. She co-facilitates a peer support group every month, supports play sessions, and assists others with benefit applications. She is also studying SEND law and would like to support families in her position in the future.

Summary of the findings

- Funded projects highlighted the challenges of **rising demand** and the need for capacity management due to the increased reach of organisations, which impacted upon them having higher workloads. Staff also reported positive individual impacts such as personal learning and development.
- **Organisational development** and the implementation of development plans were reported as being beneficial for all funded organisations. **Networking and support** from Nova were emphasized as positive, as were the peer support and partnership connections that were facilitated as part of Thinking Differently.
- The theme of **funding and financial sustainability** was discussed in all interviews. There were positive impacts from Thinking Differently, including support with long-term planning to enhance sustainability. Organisations felt enabled to apply for future funding efforts, and all felt that they were in a more secure position and thus better prepared for the future.
- The **impact for organisations** was clear. Staff discussed being more stable/secure, and feeling more confident about sustaining their work having already expanded via Thinking Differently. Provision had increased through the appointment of additional staff and volunteers, with services having more reach (increased client numbers, and different communities of clients). All were able to demonstrate more robust governance.
- The **impact on mental health outcomes** was evident in the evaluation data. This was illustrated through examples of service expansion and increased reach to more service users who had mental health support needs. Service impacts were demonstrated through qualitative evidence that detailed improvements in service users' lives. Collaborative project approaches, with specific examples of joint initiatives also increased reach and impact for service users. The case studies gathered as part of the evaluation provide evidence of the value of Thinking Differently as a funding stream that encouraged holistic and networked support for service users, to enable them to work towards improving their mental health outcomes.