



External Evaluation for The Community Catalyst Programme

Terms of Reference

The Community Catalyst Programme is the result of a ground-breaking partnership to build the capacity, resilience and sustainability of VCSE organisations delivering in social housing communities across England.

1. Background information

Charities have been putting increasing pressure on government and charitable foundations to pay core costs long before the pandemic in a bid to change the funding landscape, as running costs have increased. In NCVO's series, [The Road Ahead 2023: The ongoing impact of cost of living](#), they cited what the crisis could spell for the voluntary sector in 2023:

- The cost of running a voluntary organisation will rise with rising energy prices, costly consumables, an increase in fuel prices and more expensive staff.
- Voluntary sector income will be at risk with slow sector growth, less individual giving, changes to legacy income and less public sector income.
- Demand from service users will increase with greater and more complex demands, and inequities are set to deepen.

In a recent London Funder's Report, [The Cost of Living Crisis – How are Funders Responding?](#) (2022), concerns were also raised about the impact on staff and volunteers, who are struggling with burnout, low morale, and increased workload at a time when they themselves are being hit by the crisis. There was a sense that the cost-of-living crisis is a continuation of an already 'battered' sector, which has yet to recover from the impacts of the pandemic.

As community anchor institutions, social housing providers see the value of local VCSE infrastructure to communities, the public sector and the wider economy. There is an acceptance from many large-scale social housing providers of the need to support VCSE organisations through targeted funding and capacity building – enabling them to be equipped and robust enough to face current and future challenges.

The landscape is challenging for VCSEs, and this shifting environment is exacerbated by the ongoing cost-of-living crisis and increased fundraising challenges. Many organisations require additional support to continue delivering critical services to their communities. These pressures and unprecedented demand have resulted in many organisations being consumed by delivery, with little time for key areas such as strategy, business planning, and fundraising, especially if they have scaled up quickly or shifted their focus post-pandemic. A combination of business support and core cost funding allows them the space for reflection and the support to make strategic decisions that increase their long-term resilience with confidence.

The Resilience Programme Evaluation

The Fusion21 Foundation, Clarion Futures, and Places for People funded and delivered a predecessor programme to Community Catalyst, called The Resilience Programme, which was independently evaluated.

The evaluation identified that Housing Associations (HAs) play a crucial, strategic, and increasingly recognised role in building the capacity of small and local VCSEs, reflecting both the

evolving expectations of the nonprofit sector and the unique position HAs occupy within communities in the UK today. HAs are uniquely well-placed to identify, reach, and support small VCSEs that provide vital services to residents, particularly those most at risk from economic and social shocks. Their embeddedness in communities enables HAs to act as effective connectors and referrers, channelling support directly to grassroots organisations often underserved by mainstream infrastructure and funders. This role is increasingly important in a context of rising need, constrained resources, and a sector struggling with short-termism, leadership burnout, and lack of core capacity support.

The evaluation identified that a holistic approach, combining trusted relationships, consultancy-led capacity building, network-building, and funding, was found to lead to demonstrable improvements in governance, organisational effectiveness, adaptability, financial sustainability, and ultimately increased independence among partner VCSEs.

The findings of the previous resilience programme evaluation have informed the design of the Community Catalyst Programme. The full evaluation is available at Appendix 1.

The Community Catalyst Programme

The Community Catalyst is funded and delivered by a consortium of Housing Associations and organisations, including the Fusion21 Foundation, Clarion Futures, Places for People, Peabody and Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing (MTVH) (The Community Catalyst Consortium). The programme provides capacity-building and grant funding for VCSE organisations working with and in their communities, aiming to achieve better outcomes for stronger organisations and more resilient communities.

VCSE organisations that work with Housing Associations that are Fusion21 members can participate in the programme.

The strategic framework for the programme outlined below also highlights the five dimensions of organisational capacity that the consultancy support encompasses.



The 3-phase programme provides targeted ‘business support’ and core costs grants to VCSE organisations that are delivering critical services in our communities.

1. **Consultancy support:** A holistic programme of business support led by an expert team of experienced VCSE consultants, working with community organisations where they are at, to identify areas of need and develop a bespoke, targeted programme of support to move them forward.
2. **Core cost grants:** Organisations that engage in the non-financial business support programme have the opportunity to apply for core costs funding to help underpin their strategies, up to a value of £10,000.
3. **Peer-Learning Events & Resources:** An innovation brought forward from The Resilience Programme, peer-learning events are in-person events providing opportunities for VCSE organisations in The Community Catalyst Programme to come together and learn from each other’s experience of receiving consultancy support and the development pathways each organisation is on. In addition, VCSE organisations have access to a resource and referral page on Clarion Futures’ website, through which they can access other tools and opportunities, such as webinars, etc.

Overall, this programme promotes a shift away from reliance on short-term, ad-hoc project funding towards stabilising grant support, which helps meet VCSEs’ increasing costs and business development needs, thereby improving the quality and sustainability of provision within the sector in the long term.

2. Scope of the evaluation

There are three aspects that are in scope for this evaluation:

- The Community Catalyst Programme and its predecessors: The Recovery and Resilience Programme (2021 – 22), the Grants Plus Programme (2022 – 23), and The Resilience Programme (2023 – 25). All four programmes are or were only delivered in England.

- The role of Housing Associations in delivering place-based services and community support.
- The relationship between the Community Catalyst Programme and Clarion's [Sustainability Pillars](#), MTVH's [2030 Action Plan](#) (especially the Community Impact theme), Social Value goals and ESG criteria, Peabody's [ESG Strategy 2023-26](#) and [Sustainability strategy \(especially Social\)](#) and its [Community Investment Strategy](#), and Places for People's [ESG commitments](#).¹

3. Purpose

As well as fulfilling compliance requirements connected to the funding received from the Fusion21 Foundation, the Community Catalyst Consortium is also interested in understanding the performance of this programme and the results generated for communities and residents/tenants, and how this relates to Housing Associations' priorities.

The Fusion21 Foundation is particularly interested in understanding the difference this programme makes for communities and residents/tenants and how their needs can be met through sustainable and resilient VCSE partners. They also want to understand how communities of smaller Housing Associations may have benefited through this project, and how differently sized Housing Associations accessed and used this programme.

4. Intended users and uses

This evaluation will be used primarily by:

- The Community Catalyst Consortium: The evaluation will contribute to thought leadership, Housing Association and VCSE sector learning, as well as be used for funding applications, future strategy design, etc. The results will also be fed back internally to the specific teams and units that work directly with VCSE partners.
- The Fusion21 Foundation: The evaluation will be used to assess the effectiveness of the grant awarded to deliver the Community Catalyst Programme, as well as to inform its future grant-making strategy.

5. Evaluation questions

The Community Catalyst Consortium have identified a small number of focused, high-level key evaluation questions that consider overall programme performance. The evaluator should further unpack each of these key evaluation questions (KEQs) during the inception period as part of the evaluation design process. There will also be an opportunity to challenge the KEQs and suggest improved alternative questions.

Key Evaluation Questions

1. What was the quality of the programme design?
2. How well was the programme implemented (and adapted as needed)?
3. Did the programme produce the intended results? If so, for whom, to what extent and in what circumstances?
4. What unintended results, positive and negative, did the programme produce? How did these occur?
5. How valuable were the results to the Community Catalyst Consortium, VCSE partners, and the communities involved?

¹ Clarion Futures, MTVH and Places for People link their sustainability and ESG work to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We do not expect the evaluator to link results from the Community Catalyst Programme to the SDGs.

6. To what extent did the programme represent the best possible use of available resources to achieve results of the greatest possible value to VCSE partners and the community?
7. How are any positive results likely to be sustained, and any negative results addressed?
8. How effective was the collaboration between the members of the Community Catalyst Consortium and Almond Tree Strategic Consulting, and what learning can be drawn about the impact of this collaboration?

6. The principles that will guide the evaluation

- Openness: We are comfortable having honest conversations, treating others with fairness, and understanding.
- Transparency: We believe in being open and honest.
- Collaboration: We believe in working together to achieve a greater impact and welcome opportunities to collaborate further.
- Participation: We encourage participatory approaches and opportunities to engage our teams in designing and delivering programmes.

7. Methodology

The evaluator will be able to develop an evaluation methodology that is relevant to its proposed evaluation design. Any evaluation methodology proposed should include the following activities as a minimum, setting out how these activities will support the methodology.

Retrieving existing documents and data. For example:

- Formal policy documents, implementation plans and reports.
- Programme monitoring data.
- Any relevant official statistics.
- Programme records.

Collecting data from individuals or groups. For example:

- Key informant interviews (specify, e.g. key informant, individual, group, focus group discussions, projective techniques).
- Focus group discussions (or similar group work).
- Questionnaires or surveys.
- Case studies.

A sampling approach will be agreed upon between Clarion Futures, and the Evaluator to ensure a robust data set is achieved.

8. Roles and responsibilities

The evaluator will be expected to:

- Review existing documents and data.
- Collect fresh primary data.
- Analyse both project and evaluation data.
- Prepare the relevant reports (see section 10).
- Facilitate workshops (including aspects of the Peer Learning Events) to consider the evaluation outputs, their implications and how the Community Catalyst Consortium can use the evaluation outputs.

Clarion Futures and the wider consortium partners will:

- Facilitate introductions to key partners for focus groups and key informant interviews.
- Provide all relevant programme documentation necessary for the evaluation.

- Manage the contractual arrangements with the Evaluator.

The Community Catalyst Programme Evaluation Manager will:

- Act as the key contact for the Evaluator.

9. Evaluator qualifications

The evaluation will be conducted by an independent evaluator or a team of evaluators. The evaluator(s) should be able to demonstrate the following qualities:

1. Independence and credibility are of central importance.
2. Qualitative and quantitative expertise and experience.
3. Evaluation experience and expertise.
4. Flexibility and ability to problem-solve.
5. Sensitivity to the principles of the Community Catalyst Programme (empowerment, participatory, capacity building).
6. Ability to effectively communicate with the main users and audiences of the evaluation.
7. Knowledge and experience of the UK social housing sector.
8. Knowledge and experience of organisational capacity-building programmes.

As community-based organisations and funders working with a diverse range of people and organisations, the Community Catalyst Consortium members take a strategic, multi-faceted approach to ensuring they champion and embody equity, diversity and inclusion in their support for communities and staff. Key EDI priorities include creating an inclusive and welcoming work environment; designing accessible services for those with diverse needs; and ensuring they are open to working with all organisations that share the consortium members' community investment goals.

As such, any individual evaluator, or team of evaluators, should evidence how EDI principles are embedded in their ways of working, team composition, and methods of engagement, ensuring that evaluation processes are inclusive, fair, and sensitive to different perspectives and experiences.

10. Reporting requirements

The following evaluation outputs are required:

1. **An interim report**, issued just after the midpoint of the programme, focused mainly on the consultancy support and any peer-learning events that had taken place by that time. This report will not only present analysis on results achieved to date but will also be used by the Community Catalyst partners to make any adjustments needed for the second half of the programme.
2. **A technical 'final' report** containing a detailed assessment of the Community Catalyst Programme, methodology, findings, conclusions and recommendations, as well as appendices as needed. This report will cover the consultancy support programme (which will finish before the core cost grants element), core cost grants completed by the end of the consultancy support programme, and peer learning events. This report should also include an assessment of the effect of the programme on communities, residents and tenants.
 - a. **A 'stand-alone' executive summary** (this might be the same executive summary as in the technical report) that is presented as a publishable PDF
 - b. **A slide deck** summarising the main findings, conclusions and recommendations of the evaluation that can be used in presentations, etc.

- c. **An impact card** that can be used as a stand alone item as well as being embedded within the report to demonstrate the key outcomes and convey stories of impact
3. **An end-of-grant-programme report on the core cost grants** completed after the consultancy support programme.
4. All outputs need to acknowledge and reference the Fusion21 Foundation, Clarion Futures, Places for People, Peabody, MTVH, and Almond Tree Strategic Consulting (use of logos, etc.).

11. Budget for the Evaluation

The budget envelope for this evaluation is up to £100,000, inclusive of VAT, across 3 years

Your evaluation budget should include the costs of:

- Personnel (e.g. evaluator(s), research assistant, support staff, etc.) per day or lump sum
- Travel (for in-person data collection, attending meetings and workshops, etc.)
- Workshops (design, findings verification, utilisation, etc.)
- Facilitation of use by the intended users

Value for Money is an important consideration for the Community Catalyst Consortium and will be balanced against the utility of the proposed evaluation design and outputs.

12. Evaluation timeline and milestones

We currently anticipate that the evaluation activities and outputs will be delivered in a staggered programme of work commencing no later than December 2025, as set out in the table below.

Timeframe	Activity
Dec 2025 – Mar 2026	Planning and Inception (including an initial document review)
Apr – Oct 2026	Data collection and analysis
December 2026	Milestone: Mid-Term Evaluation Report Delivered
Jan – Feb 2027	Facilitated workshop to review and understand the report and agree on use/recommendations (exact date TBC)
Mar 2027 – Mar 2028	Data collection and analysis (NOTE: the consultancy support element concludes in March 2028).
Apr 2028	Milestone: ‘Final’ Technical Report and Appendices, etc. Delivered
Apr 2028	Facilitated workshop to review and understand the report and agree on use/recommendations
May – Oct 2028	Data collection and analysis
Nov 2028	Milestone: Final Core Cost Grant Report Delivered

13. Process for responding to these Terms of Reference

Evaluators should submit a proposal no longer than five pages (excluding appendices).

The proposal must include:

- Contact details of the organisation.
- Name and contact details of the lead evaluator.
- Summary of the team and how you meet the tender requirements, including:
 - Demonstrating an understanding of the brief.
 - Knowledge and understanding of the sector/area of work.
 - Track record in evaluating similar programmes.
 - How you meet the evaluator qualifications in section 9.

- Proposed methodology.
- A detailed timetable for carrying out the work, highlighting key milestones.
- Budget, broken down by days, activity and personnel (if a team is proposed).

The tendering timeline is set out below:

Milestone	Dates
Invitation to Tender deadline	Friday 14 November 2025
Submission review	Mon 17 Nov - Fri 21 Nov 2025
Virtual Interviews	w/c 01 Dec 2025
Appointment and pre-contracting & Atamis	w/c 08 Dec 2025
Contracting & Kick-off call	w/c 15 Dec 2025

Questions relating to these Terms of Reference can be submitted via Atamis. Anonymised responses will be sent to everyone who submitted a question.

Proposals must be submitted via Atamis **no later than 12 noon on Friday, 14 November 2025**.

Interviews will take place in the week commencing 01 December 2025. We hope to appoint the external evaluator no later than the week commencing 08 December 2025.