

Grassroots Grants

Understanding Your Community's Needs

How we developed our funding priorities for South Lanarkshire, South Ayrshire, Scottish Borders, and Dumfries & Galloway

Introduction

We are launching a new grant programme to support charities and community groups in South Lanarkshire, South Ayrshire, Scottish Borders, and Dumfries & Galloway. Before designing this fund, we wanted to make sure it would genuinely address the needs that matter most to local communities.

This document explains the extensive research we undertook to understand what your communities need, how we developed our funding themes, and how you can help us continue to improve the programme.

Our Research Approach

We believe that effective grant-making must be grounded in genuine understanding of local needs. That's why we invested significant time and resources into a comprehensive research programme before finalising our funding priorities.

What we did

Our research combined multiple approaches to build a complete picture of community needs:

Analysis of Regional Data

We undertook detailed quantitative research into each of the four regions, examining demographic trends, deprivation indicators, health statistics, employment data, and other key measures. This gave us an evidence base for understanding the scale and nature of challenges facing different communities.

Review of Local Authority and Community Plans

We carefully reviewed the strategic plans and priorities published by each relevant Local Authority, as well as information from Community Councils and local planning partnerships. This ensured our funding themes align with the priorities that local democratic bodies have already identified.

Conversations with Third Sector Experts

We conducted in-depth interviews with organisations that have direct experience of supporting communities on the ground. These conversations helped us understand the lived reality behind the statistics and identify needs that might not appear in official data.

Who We Spoke To

We engaged with a broad range of third sector organisations with expertise across our four regions. These included:

- Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) – the national membership body representing charities across Scotland
- Scottish Rural Network – specialists in rural community development across Scotland
- Inspiring Scotland – a venture philanthropy organisation connecting businesses with charities
- Sported – supporting community sports groups to transform young people's lives
- Borders Community Action – the Third Sector Interface for Scottish Borders

- Voluntary Action South Lanarkshire (VASLAN) – the Third Sector Interface for South Lanarkshire
- Third Sector Dumfries and Galloway – the Third Sector Interface for Dumfries & Galloway
- Representatives from the South Ayrshire Local Action Group

We achieved an 89% response rate from the organisations we approached, reflecting the sector's enthusiasm for ensuring this fund meets real community needs. We are grateful to everyone who gave their time and expertise.

What We Learned

Our research revealed several consistent themes across all four regions, alongside important local variations that will shape how we assess applications in each area.

Challenges facing communities

The research highlighted a number of interconnected challenges:

- Transport and accessibility remain critical barriers, particularly in rural areas. **One in five households have no access to a vehicle**, yet nearly half the population lives in rural settings with limited or no public transport.
- Hidden deprivation is a significant issue. **Standard deprivation measures often miss rural poverty**, where small pockets of affluence can mask nearby areas of intense need.
- Child poverty rates exceed the national average across all four regions, with up to **one in three children affected in some areas**. Single-parent families are disproportionately impacted.
- Social isolation affects people of all ages but particularly older residents in rural areas. Many **communities have only just returned to pre-pandemic levels of social activity**.
- **Community facilities**, especially village halls and sports facilities, are vital anchor institutions but often **struggle with running costs and energy bills**.
- **Mental health support is insufficient**, with particular gaps for young people aged 16-18.
- The third sector is under enormous pressure, with public sector cuts creating expectations that charities will bridge widening gaps in services while many **volunteers have not returned after the pandemic**.

What makes a difference

Our conversations also identified what kinds of projects tend to have the greatest impact:

- Projects that address transport barriers creatively – whether through community transport, mobile services, or helping people access existing provision
- Initiatives that build lasting relationships and community connections beyond the immediate project
- Support that wraps around people's lives – for example, offering childcare alongside training courses, or combining activities with other services
- Investment in community spaces that serve as hubs for multiple activities and services
- Projects that actively reach out to isolated individuals rather than waiting for them to come forward

Our Funding Themes

Based on this research, we have established six broad funding themes. These themes were consistently highlighted across our data analysis, local authority plans, and third sector interviews:

1. Strengthening Financial Resilience and School Attainment

Supporting families facing financial hardship, addressing child poverty, and helping children and young people succeed in education. This includes projects that tackle the poverty-related attainment gap and support parents to improve household finances.

2. Employability Support and Skills Development

Helping people develop skills, gain qualifications, and access employment opportunities. This includes projects that address barriers to work such as lack of childcare, transport, or confidence, as well as direct training and employment support.

3. Social and Digital Inclusion, Wellbeing and Active Lifestyles

Tackling social isolation, improving mental and physical health, and helping people connect with their communities. This includes sports and physical activity projects, mental health support, befriending services, and digital inclusion initiatives.

4. Improving Community Spaces and Buildings

Supporting the development, improvement, and sustainable operation of community facilities. This includes village halls, sports facilities, and other spaces where people come together, with particular emphasis on energy efficiency and long-term viability.

5. Enhancing Green Spaces and Access to Nature

Protecting and improving local environments, creating opportunities for people to enjoy nature, and supporting biodiversity. This includes community gardens, green health initiatives, and environmental conservation projects.

6. Sustainable and Inclusive Transport

Improving connectivity and access to services, particularly in rural areas. This includes community transport schemes, initiatives that help people learn to drive, car-sharing projects, and other solutions to transport barriers.

Regional Priorities

While these themes apply across all four regions, our research identified that different areas have different priority needs. When we assess applications, we will take account of how well projects align with the specific priorities identified for their area.

We have mapped our themes against the priorities identified in Local Authority community plans, Community Council priorities, regional statistics, and our interview findings. This means that similar projects may be assessed differently depending on how closely they match the documented needs in their specific area.

Full details of regional priorities will be published in our applicant guidance, including specific reference to priorities from local community action plans.

Priority Groups

Our research identified several groups who face particular barriers to accessing support. We will particularly welcome applications that benefit:

- Isolated older people, especially in rural areas
- People with physical health conditions or long-term illnesses
- Households with low income
- Working families, particularly single parents
- Carers, including young carers
- Young people not in education, employment or training

- People who are digitally excluded
- People living off the gas grid and facing fuel poverty
- People without access to public transport
- People with learning disabilities
- People in addiction recovery
- People experiencing or at risk of homelessness
- People needing mental health support, particularly young people

Our Commitment

We are committed to making this fund as accessible and effective as possible. Based on feedback from the sector, we will:

- Keep application and monitoring requirements proportionate to grant size
- Accept that standard deprivation data may not reflect rural poverty and assess applications accordingly
- Recognise the importance of core costs and allow up to 20% of a funding request to consist of relevant overheads.
- Provide upfront grant payments to help organisations deliver their projects
- Offer extensive guidance documentation and a dedicated support team to help organisations submit strong applications

Have Your Say!

This research represents our starting point, not our final word. We want to hear from communities across South Lanarkshire, South Ayrshire, Scottish Borders, and Dumfries & Galloway to ensure our fund continues to reflect local needs.

We welcome your feedback on:

- Whether our funding themes reflect the priorities you see in your community
- Groups or needs that you feel we may have missed
- How we can make the application process as accessible as possible
- Local organisations doing excellent work that we should know about

Get in touch

We would love to hear from you. Please share your thoughts with us:

- Email: SPENGrassrootsGrants@Localgiving.org
- X: x.com/localgiving
- Facebook: facebook.com/Localgiving
- LinkedIn: linkedin.com/company/localgiving/
- Instagram: instagram.com/localgiving/
- BlueSky: localgiving.bsky.social

Your input will help us ensure this fund makes the greatest possible difference to communities across Scotland.

Thank you for helping us get this right.