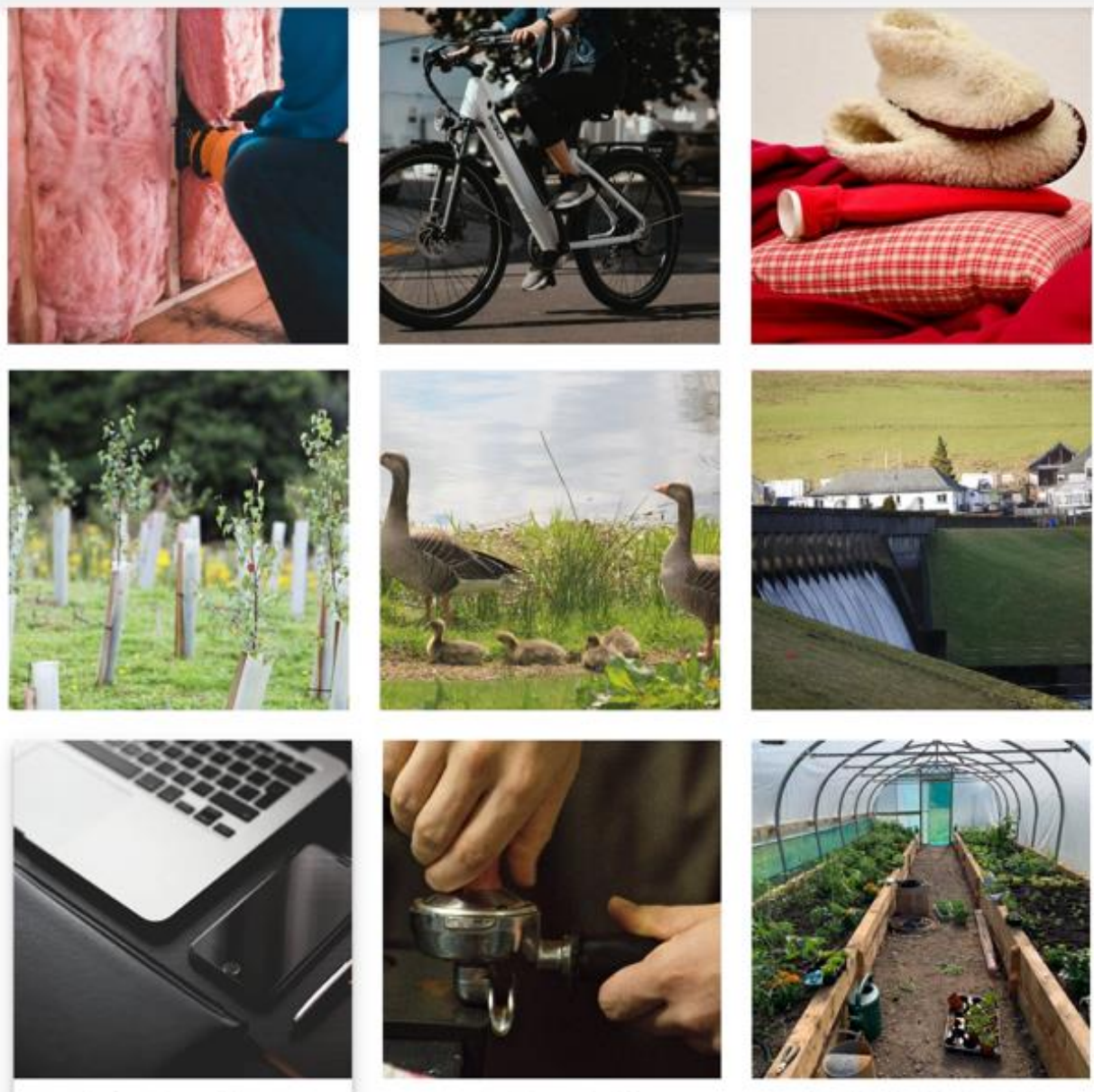




# Valley Renewables Group development trust

*Carron Valley & District Community*

## 22-23 Grants Evaluation



[www.valleyrenewables.co.uk](http://www.valleyrenewables.co.uk)

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## Contents

Contents .....	2
Introduction .....	3
Method.....	3
VRG Mission and Objectives.....	3
A summary of the community feedback received in 2021 .....	5
Summary of VRG Grant Schemes from Sept 2023 .....	6
VRG 22-23 grant giving alignment with the VRG 23-28 Strategy.....	7
Key Observations.....	8
Recommendations for VRG Grant Scheme.....	10
Conclusion .....	11

## Introduction

This piece of work has been commissioned by Valley Renewables Group (VRG) in order to carry out a high level evaluation of the grant schemes delivered by VRG from July 2022 to June 2023.

The aims of this report are to:

- Summarise the key points raised about VRG grant giving in feedback from stakeholders, including previous and current grant recipients.
- Consider the alignment of VRG grant giving to the objectives stated in the VRG Strategy 23-28
- Provide recommendations for any further changes to VRG grant schemes going forward, for discussion with the Grants sub-group.

VRG will use this report to inform current and future grant scheme delivery, making changes as appropriate to ensure that VRG grants help to achieve the expected outcomes set out in the VRG Strategy 23-28.

## Method

The following work was undertaken to deliver this report:

- Clarification of the aims of the VRG grant scheme and objectives of the VRG Strategy 23-28
- Desk review of all grants given in 22-23, based upon information provided by VRG.
- Desk review of the recent changes made to the VRG grant schemes.
- Analysis of previous interviews with members of the community to identify key points raised about the VRG grant schemes.
- Analysis of feedback received from recipients of grants in 22-23.
- Information cross checked against the VRG Strategy 23 -28 Objectives for alignment and any gaps in delivery identified.
- Recommendations made for future changes to the VRG grant schemes to support improved alignment with the VRG Strategy 23-28 going forward.

## VRG Mission and Objectives

The VRG Strategy 23-28 clarifies VRG's focus for the next five years and provides the framework for VRG's activity.

### VRG Mission:

The Carron Valley and District neighbourhoods are collaborative and resilient, so able to act on future opportunities and challenges as they arise.

The strategic focus for VRG’s activities going forward is two-fold:

**Working towards improved energy efficiency for all homes** in the area, using individual and community grants, loans, staff resource and specialist advice as required.

**Increasing small scale and localised activities** in the Carron Valley and District area, acknowledging that there is no central point geographically so valuing activity across all neighbourhoods.

The VRG grant schemes play an integral role in the delivery of VRG’s mission and strategic focus. Within the VRG Strategy 23-28 there are three grant specific objectives:

Aim 1	Objectives
<p><b>Distribute VRG unrestricted and restricted funds fairly and transparently across the Carron Valley and District community, benefitting as many people as possible and reaching those most in need.</b></p>	<p>1a) Allocate <b>individual and community grants</b> using a clear and transparent process, updating the focus of grants to attract new applicants as appropriate.</p> <p>AND</p> <p>1b) Support people to work towards <b>energy efficient homes</b> through individual and community grants, together with bespoke projects, schemes and advice as appropriate.</p>
Aim 3	Objectives
<p><b>Support community asset development</b> with grant support through an informed and transparent decision making process.</p>	<p>3a) <b>Support viable and sustainable community projects</b> that address identified neighbourhood challenges and interests, including environment and heritage.</p>

These objectives are informed by the feedback received from the community survey that was carried out when developing the VRG Strategy 23-28. This highlighted the top five issues that have a negative impact on quality of life for people living within the Carron Valley area, together with mitigating actions that VRG could potentially support through the grant schemes:

- Rising cost of living (*support with living costs*)
- Fuel costs (*improved energy efficiency*)
- Lack of transport (*alternative transport options*)
- No central meeting point (*community projects and activities throughout the whole area*)
- Inefficient heating systems (*insulation and heating system improvements*)

## A summary of the community feedback received in 2021:

VRG is recognised by the local community as being excellent at distributing local grants through a number of grant schemes. The **individual grants** are very popular with most people, as they tackle local needs directly and deliver good outcomes for individuals. They are viewed as the most important thing that VRG delivers by many. The grants need to reach as many people as possible, and there was some concern that the distribution wasn't reaching the people most in need. It is important to broaden uptake and make sure that the people who need the grants most are accessing them. A focus on energy efficiency measures and an increase in maximum individual grants in 22-23 has made them more accessible for households wanting to move away from oil boilers to solar panels or air source heat pumps or carry out significant insulation works.

- *'Any means of distributing money to households to mitigate energy costs would be good. Bigger picture grants that involve many households e.g. solar panels, insulation grants etc.'*
- *'Grants for energy efficiency would be good.... personal grants for solar panels.... There needs to be a higher level of grant'.*
- *'Improving people's houses so increasing energy efficiency - increasing insulation, moving away from oil boilers to air source heat pumps and solar panels. Needs higher levels of grant than currently given.'*
- *We need to give out grants fairly – which means reaching people who can't afford to put systems in themselves. It is not about everyone getting the same..... it is about reaching those who need it most.*
- *'Grant system a is bit unfair in several aspects. People need to be able to afford excess costs of any project. Grants go to those who least need it'.*
- *Make sure everyone knows what is available.... So long as it is fair and open to all, then that's fine.*
- *'It is important to maintain the grants for young people as we need to attract people in'.*
- *'It is good to make the community attractive for younger people with families.... To encourage more families in...we need succession for the community, so want to be open and welcoming...'*

**Small Community Grants** were also viewed as positive, although there is very low uptake, (2 grants applied for and allocated in 22-23). Small community grants could be used by neighbourhoods to fund small, localised projects and activities to bring people together locally. More promotion about what the community grants can be used for would be helpful, together with clarifying the fact that projects are open and welcoming to all, and not expected to draw people from across the whole area, as geography is so limiting. Small community events and activities in each locality/ community are all beneficial and help with community cohesion and resilience.

*'Activities for younger children would be good and older people.'*

*'Some people very keen to have a meeting space - we recognise it won't benefit everyone but see it a catalyst for wider activity .... It doesn't need to attract everyone, just provide positive impact for the community who use it.'*

**Feedback from grant beneficiaries in 2022-23.** One feedback form was received from the VRG grant beneficiaries in 22-23. This response illustrated a positive impact on wellbeing, economic savings and carbon footprint, with new skills being learned. Given the nature of the individual grants, feedback forms do not provide additional information about the outcomes achieved and could be seen to add

unnecessary complexity to the process. Receiving requested grant funding towards an identified activity or capital expenditure that fits the grant scheme eligibility criteria will by definition deliver a positive outcome. It will therefore be more useful for VRG to continue to carry out wider community consultation around VRG’s delivery against its strategic objectives going forward, as opposed to continuing to request feedback from individual grant beneficiaries.

## Summary of VRG Grant Schemes from Sept 2023

### New from Summer 2023:

**Energy Efficiency grants** - Grant funding of up to £1000 can be applied for to support projects which support energy efficiency.

**Warm Up, Costs Down Grant** - This grant will reopen later in 2023. Grant funding of up to £250 can be applied for to support the purchase of a “bundle of items” to keep people warm at home or help reduce energy costs during the winter.

### Ongoing grants

The **E-bike-grant** has been extracted from the Household grants and set up as a separate scheme - VRG offers grants of up to £500 for the purchase of an E-Bike or the conversion of a bike to an E-Bike.

**Children & Young People Grant** - Annual grants available to Carron Valley & District Area Residents aged 0-26 to support education, skills development or meeting the challenges of rural living.

**Student Bursary Scheme** - Annual grants of up to £500 for students resident in the Carron Valley & District Area in full time further education or on a registered apprenticeship programme.

**Community Grants** - Small Community Grants of up to £5,000 and Large Community Grants over £5,000 available to Community Projects which benefit residents of the Carron Valley & District Area.

**New Venture Fund** - Up to £1,000 as a 50% grant and a 50% repayable interest free loan, for new entrepreneurial ventures operated by residents of the Carron Valley & District area.

**Get the Valley Growing Grant Scheme** – This is a popular seasonal scheme which opens in April and closes in October each year.

### Now Closed

**General Household grants** - maximum £500 per application - general grants to support household capital projects. This scheme has now been closed and replaced with the Energy Efficiency E-bike and other specific grant schemes.

The grants given out through the various schemes are summarised in the table below, with the objective that they best align with in the last column.

VRG Grant Schemes July 2022 to June 2023	Number	Total £	Objective
<b>Household grants</b> - maximum £500 per application (general household projects, now discontinued)	24	£10,921	1a
<b>Energy Efficiency Grant Scheme</b> - £1,000 per household (enhanced grants and technical support for home insulation and heating).	29	£27,279	1b
<b>Children and Young People’s Grant Scheme</b> - maximum £250 (to assist those aged up to 25 with training, equipment, travel, education, environmental projects and child support).	13	£3,047	1a
<b>Student Bursary Scheme</b> - £500 per year	5	£2,500	1a



<b>Get the Valley Growing - £500</b> (self-sufficiency and food security - grants towards polytunnels, compost bins, greenhouses, raised beds, plants, seeds, compost and gardening sundries).	34	£12,608	1a
<b>Linked Fire Alarms</b> - £220 (to comply with Scottish Government legislation requiring linked fire alarms in every home) 54 grants in total. Now closed.	12	£1,983	1a
<b>The Warm Up/Costs Down</b> - £250 (funding for air fryers, slow cookers, microwave ovens, clothes dryers, dehumidifiers, thermal blankets)	40	£9,618	1b
<b>Electric Bike Scheme</b> - £500 towards e-bike purchase or conversion of bikes to e-bikes.	1	£500	1b
<b>Community Group grants</b> – max £5,000 (collaborative projects across parts of the community)	2	£1,896	3a
<b>Total</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>£70,352</b>	

## VRG 22-23 grant giving alignment with the VRG 23-28 Strategy

VRG is keen to address the objectives of the 23-28 strategy as clearly as it can through its grant schemes and to react positively to the community feedback received. It has initiated this by implementing early changes to the grants' schemes in 22-23.

The key changes made to the grant schemes in 22-23 together with how they address the community feedback and VRG Strategy objectives are summarised below:

VRG Mission, focus and objectives	How addressed by VRG Grant Scheme in 22-23
<b>VRG Mission</b> ...neighbourhoods are collaborative and resilient, so able to act on future opportunities and challenges as they arise	Individual grants impacting positively on neighbourhoods. Housing stock improved through Energy Efficiency and Linked Fire Alarms grants. Student and Children and Young People's grants continued, so supporting younger generations
<b>Focus 1) Working towards improved energy efficiency for all homes</b>	New Energy Efficiency grant scheme introduced and very popular (29 grants, £27k distributed)
<b>Objective 1a) Allocate individual and community grants</b> using a clear and transparent process, updating the focus of grants to attract new applicants as appropriate	New focussed grants introduced to encourage applications. 70% of the community have accessed a grant in 22-23. Grant schemes have been separated out and targeted (e.g. E-bikes and Energy Efficiency) and a limit of one grant per scheme per household set (and two grants per household for E-bikes), so that people can apply for grants for separate items. The process is clearly explained on the website. A summary of all grants allocated in a financial year is provided in the Annual Report and also shared quarterly in the VRG Newsletter.
<b>Objective 1b) Support people to work towards energy efficient homes</b> through individual and	Energy Efficiency grant scheme introduced

community grants, together with bespoke projects, schemes and advice as appropriate	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rising cost of living (<i>support with living costs</i>)</li> </ul>	Energy Efficiency grant scheme introduced
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fuel costs (<i>improve energy efficiency</i>)</li> </ul>	Energy Efficiency and warm up / costs down grant schemes introduced
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of transport (<i>alternative transport options</i>)</li> </ul>	E-bike grant scheme split out from the Household scheme and highlighted separately
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inefficient heating systems (<i>insulation and heating system improvements</i>)</li> </ul>	Energy Efficiency and warm up / costs down grant schemes introduced
Focus 2) Increasing small scale and localised activities	Community grant scheme continued, although uptake very low. New Venture Fund ongoing
Objective 3a) Support viable and sustainable community projects that address identified neighbourhood challenges and interests, including environment and heritage	Community grant scheme continued
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No central meeting point (<i>community projects and activities throughout the whole area</i>)</li> </ul>	Community grant scheme continued
Community feedback – fair and transparent distribution of grants	Grants well promoted on website and Facebook. Annual report and quarterly Newsletter used to feedback on number of grants distributed annually.
Community feedback - increase the maximum grants to make more accessible	Maximum individual grant increased to £1,000 from £500.

## Key Observations

- The total amount of unrestricted funding distributed through VRG grant schemes has increased since 21-22, totalling £70,352 in 22-23, including community grants. This equates to 100% of the total VRG unrestricted income for 22-23 and is in line with community feedback that individual grants are the most appropriate way to use unrestricted funds.
- The number of people in the community accessing VRG grants has increased, with 75% of households in the area receiving one or more grants since VRG started distribution of wind farm benefits. Last financial year an additional 13 households applied for and were granted funds for the first time. This is likely to be the positive result of splitting grants into specific targeted areas and increasing the total grant that can be applied for, which was in direct response to the community feedback received.
- The previous Household Grants have been replaced with the more focussed **Energy Efficiency and Warm Up/Costs Down grants**, illustrating a direct move to adhere more closely with the VRG Strategy. There has been a very good uptake of these grants since they opened. It has successfully encouraged people to apply for grants by being clear about what the money can be spent on. The new grants were extremely successful at distributing funding across the community, with 29 and 40 individual grants being delivered respectively across these two schemes. The maximum amount per household, with no requirement for match funding, has contributed towards ensuring that grant distribution is fair and reaches people who need it.



- The **E-bike grants** have been split out from the Household scheme and have awarded one grant to date. This scheme is now being highlighted separately and addresses the lack of local transport issues raised in the community survey.
- The continuation of the **Children and Young People grant** and **Student Bursaries** maintains VRG's young people focus, which, although not a specific strategic objective, addresses the VRG Mission of community resilience by supporting young people and families and encouraging them to stay in the Carron Valley area.
- **Get the Valley Growing grants** have been stopped for the winter and will start again in the spring.
- **The Linked fire alarms** scheme was introduced due to specific legislation being brought in by the Government requiring linked fire alarms. VRG was in a position to support households to implement this and improve safety within homes. It was a one-off scheme which has now been closed.
- All these individual grants have strengthened the **resilience of the communities** that they have benefitted by increasing household efficiency, improving the lives of young people, increasing local growing and improving fire safety.
- The **Community Projects** grant is ongoing, with a maximum of £5,000 grant. However only two small Community projects applied for funding and were awarded grants in 22-23. This is an area where VRG grant giving activity is not addressing the desired outcome in the VRG Strategy and alignment could be improved.
- The **New Venture Fund** is an ongoing fund targeting entrepreneurial activity that has not had any take up in 22-23. This therefore needs to be reviewed and potentially simplified to encourage uptake if VRG wishes to continue to encourage small scale entrepreneurial activity in the area.

As shown above, VRG has made significant efforts to align the current grant schemes with the VRG Strategy 23-28 and to address the community feedback received. As a further illustration of this, the key actions that were recommended at the end of the VRG Strategy 23-28 regarding grant giving are listed below, together with the responsive actions taken by VRG.

- **Agree any changes to the grants process**, including promotion, levels of grants and monitoring outcomes – *A number of relevant changes have been made to VRG grant schemes in Summer 2023*
- **Continue distribution of individual grants** under a range of different areas, increasing the maximum grants available slightly to accommodate larger capital elements such as insulation and air source heat pumps, in conjunction with Government grants - *Maximum grant levels increased and energy efficiency, warm up /costs down and e-bike grants separated out from Household grants in summer 2023.*
- **Promote and highlight community grant use** for small community activities as an important aspect of broader community wide benefits - *Promotion on the website alongside the individual grant schemes.*

## Recommendations for the VRG Grant Schemes

Overall the VRG grant schemes align well with the VRG Strategy 23-28. The following recommendations may help to improve how VRG addresses the key objectives in the future.

1. **The changes made by VRG for 22-23** grant giving have been extremely effective in delivering against strategic **objective 1b)** *'supporting people to work towards energy efficient homes through individual and community grants, together with bespoke projects, schemes and advice as appropriate'*. Continuation of the Energy Efficiency and Warm Up/Costs Down grants will be positive for the community.
2. **Objective 1a)** *'allocate individual and community grants using a clear and transparent process, updating the focus of grants to attract new applicants as appropriate'*, has been addressed by relevant changes being made to the grant schemes and 160 grants being allocated. The number of people in the community accessing VRG grants has also increased, with 75% of households in the area now having received one or more grants since VRG started distribution of wind farm benefits. Last financial year an additional 13 households applied for and were granted funds for the first time in 22-23. The outcome of the grant schemes is shared quarterly in the Newsletter, ensuring that everyone is aware of the number of grants allocated on a regular basis.
3. **The community cohesion** aspect of the VRG Mission is effectively delivered through VRG activity including the Newsletter, Open Days and for some, the Community Woodland. While individual grants are available, it must be recognised that these are likely to always be the preferred route for people to access VRG funding. However, maintaining the community grant opportunity is important for VRG and any encouragement that can be given to local people to develop collaborative projects will contribute positively toward VRG's overall mission.
4. **Objective 3a)** has been less well addressed – *'Support viable and sustainable community projects that address identified neighbourhood challenges and interests, including environment and heritage'*. Despite the mechanism for supporting community projects being in place and advertised alongside the individual grant schemes, uptake is very low. Increased use of the VRG grant funds to deliver community resilience and cohesion through local neighbourhood activity will only be achieved when local people work together to develop and deliver collaborative projects, as in the successful case of the community woodland. Small scale projects such as local neighbourhood activity groups, hire of transport to Stirling for community outings, or local energy or fuel collaborations could be further encouraged through additional publicity and promotion. Promotion of a specific focussed scheme, for neighbourhood activities for example, may help people to think about what could work locally for their community. It is not VRG's responsibility to organise or facilitate these activities though, so they are only likely to happen if local people choose to develop them, although staff support could potentially be required to catalyse this.
5. The **New Venture Fund** is an ongoing fund that has not had any take up in 22-23. This is a maximum of £1,000 with 50% grant and 50% as an interest free loan for entrepreneurial activity. This needs to be reviewed and potentially simplified to encourage uptake if VRG wishes to continue to encourage small scale entrepreneurial activity in the area.

6. **Feedback forms:** Given the nature of the individual grants, feedback forms do not provide additional information about the outcomes achieved and could be seen to add unnecessary complexity to the process. Receiving requested grant funding towards an identified activity or capital expenditure that fits the grant scheme eligibility criteria will by definition deliver a positive outcome. *It will be more useful for VRG to continue to carry out wider community consultation around VRG's delivery against its strategic objectives going forward.*
7. The **number and variety** of VRG grant schemes could potentially be confusing for potential beneficiaries and complicate the process of accessing grants. However, the more focussed approach to the grant offer has encouraged more people to apply for grants (70% of the community accessing the grant schemes in 22-23) and as the high uptake of specific focussed schemes shows (from Get the Valley Growing and Linked Fire Alarms to new Energy Efficiency and Warm Up/Costs Down grants), the clarity of targeted funding helps people to identify what they can apply for access the grants. *This could be used to attempt to improve community grant uptake by adding, for example, a Neighbourhood Activity Grant.*
8. **The long-term legacy** for Carron Valley area that is provided by the VRG individual grants is worth noting and could be promoted on the VRG website. The community has clearly stated that individual community grants are the preferred way in which VRG surplus income is distributed to the local population. These are helping to achieve a broadly improved and safer housing stock, reduced living costs and self-development opportunities for individuals within the community. This all contributes indirectly towards community resilience and cohesion by making Carron Valley a positive place to live.
9. The **work required to design, approve, evaluate, and administer** VRG grants is significant and *VRG could benefit from an additional paid staff resource to ensure that volunteers are not overburdened and that the grant schemes continue to deliver the positive outcomes that they have to this point.*

## Conclusion

The VRG Grant schemes have delivered an impressive number of individual grants (almost 160) across a wide number of people in the community (70% of the population accessing a grant). This is delivering clear positive benefits to the community and improving the energy efficiency and housing stock in the area. The changes made to the VRG grant schemes have successfully addressed the feedback provided by the community previously, although more could be done to encourage collaborative activity to improve community cohesion. This could be addressed by focussing the community or neighbourhood grants in the same way as the individual grants, and potentially by providing a staff resource to promote and support the development of collaborative neighbourhood projects.

The work required to design, approve, evaluate and administer VRG grants is significant and VRG could benefit from an additional paid staff resource to ensure that volunteers are not overburdened and that the grant schemes continue to deliver the positive outcomes that they have to this point.