

# Executive Summary

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## ***The Rapid Response Grant Programme and evaluation***

The Rapid Response Grant Programme (RRGP) was a £500,000 fund run by the Fishmongers' Company's Fisheries Charitable Trust (FCFCT) in partnership with Seafarers UK to assist fishing and seafood businesses and food charities in response to the Covid-19 outbreak. Applicants could apply if their project aimed to deliver diversification opportunities; promote and/or facilitate consumption or sale of local seafood; or provide community meals using seafood. The aims of this evaluation were to identify the measures taken by the fishing and seafood industry during the Covid-19 crisis and evaluate the impact of the RRGF on seafood businesses in the UK.

## ***Methodology***

The study team undertook a review of charitable and government Covid-19 grant programmes for the fishing and seafood trade sector. Furthermore, information was gathered from a survey (conducted by the FCFCT and Seafarers UK) which was the basis for assessing the impacts of the RRGF and the development of targeted interview questions to fill data gaps. In total, 19 interviews were held with a range of stakeholders including grant beneficiaries, unsuccessful applicants and the delivery team<sup>1</sup>.

## ***Comparison of Covid-19 grant programmes for the fishing and seafood trade sector***

The RRGF was available to applicants across the UK. In addition, government grant schemes to support the seafood industry through Covid-19 were available in each country. These included the Fisheries Respond Fund (FRF) (England), the Scottish Seafood Business Resilience Scheme, Welsh Fisheries Grants and Northern Ireland Finance Scheme. These government schemes focused on funding fixed costs associated with, for example, running a fishing vessel or aquaculture business. The RRGF and one further government scheme, the Domestic Seafood Supply Scheme (DSSS) (England only), had broader aims related to diversification and increasing the sale, supply and consumption of local seafood, thus were relevant for a wider variety of applicants. The DSSS shared common themes with the RRGF across evaluation and prioritisation criteria. These included addressing gaps in existing support; focusing on cooperation and connection with consumers; and potential to attract match funding. The RRGF's provision of smaller grants on average meant that it was able to benefit more applicants (121 applicants awarded grants) than the 20 mostly larger projects funded by the DSSS.

## ***The impact of the RRGF***

Survey data indicated that beneficiaries were spread across the UK, with a high number in the South West of England (47% of grants in the <£4,000 tier were awarded to applicants in this area). Most beneficiaries (68% of the 72 survey respondents) were fishing businesses or fishmongers/merchants. Survey and interview data showed that grants have largely been used for capital expenditure and promotional activities such as e-commerce (an aspect that remains relevant due to the ongoing need for social distancing). Grants have enabled beneficiaries to diversify their businesses, for instance through direct selling, home delivery and exporting seafood. Interview data suggested that some impacts are likely to continue for the medium or long-term e.g. improved website/online presence for advertising. Business resilience has improved in many cases; the RRGF also enabled many beneficiaries to retain jobs. Around 79% of survey respondents stated that one to three jobs were directly supported or created by the grant. Where new jobs were created, 38% thought that these could be permanent positions. However, a few interviewees noted that difficulties remain due to uncertainty around further lockdowns, Covid-19 restrictions in the hospitality sector and the extent their services will be needed, and a lack of clarity about future policy (Brexit) and funding (including any replacement for the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund).

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<sup>1</sup> Of the 19 interviews, 14 were undertaken by RPA and five by the Fishing Animateurs, who kindly assisted the study by carrying out the interviews with applicants from the South West of England.

### ***Unsuccessful grant applicants***

Unsuccessful applicants were located across the UK with the majority (12 of 31) in the South West of England, reflecting the higher number of applications received from this location. Oversubscription of the RRGF was highlighted as a key reason for unsuccessful applications. Some applicants failed to secure funding as they applied for ineligible expenditure. In a few cases, applicants were awarded less money than they requested and they declined the grant. Unsuccessful interviewees indicated that they did maintain business continuity, but they did not proceed with their projects or diversify.

### ***Comparison of beneficiaries and unsuccessful applicants***

For some beneficiaries, grants enabled the implementation of sustainable changes and grant recipients aim to continue the supported business element in the long-term. Such grant recipients are likely to have better future resilience than those who did not receive a grant. However, views on resilience varied amongst beneficiaries implying that there are likely to be variations across the sector dependent on an organisation's circumstances and its position in the supply chain. Beneficiaries also noted that positive business developments, such as newly created job positions and new projects, were due to a wide range of factors and could not always be directly attributed to the grant.

### ***Future needs***

Covid-19 has significantly affected exports and highlighted the need to promote local seafood in the UK in the longer term. It has also shown that greater collaboration within the seafood supply chain is needed to absorb or react to future shocks. Some beneficiaries felt that they would be able to further their ambitions themselves because they had diversified thanks to the grant. Others were more uncertain, expressing concerns that their future depended on government decisions on lockdown and restrictions (hospitality sector; direct sellers at the harbour) and that future funding would be required for business continuity. Types of support and initiatives suggested include training opportunities in the seafood industry, technical/marketing support and consumer education through advertising.

### ***Lessons learnt***

Industry made many positive comments related to diversification into direct selling and home delivery, observing a higher willingness to pay for seafood amongst consumers. The RRGF gave the opportunity to many beneficiaries to retain jobs and created new employment opportunities in some cases. Difficulties were encountered by single operators due to diversification into direct selling resulting in long working days and multiple demands on their time.

For the funders, collaboration with the Fishing Animateurs in the design and implementation phase helped to ensure ease of access. Having the Animateurs available to assist with applications was also beneficial. One interviewee highlighted this as "*invaluable*" because they see forms as off-putting. Projects were progressed quickly as the standard expenditure approval processes by the Fishmongers' Company were redesigned to ensure a faster turnaround. Recipients commented that the RRGF provided a "rapid response" as its name suggested, enabling beneficiaries to implement their plans quickly and easily. Due to the emergency nature of the fund, some elements of best practice were not followed. Small discrepancies in due diligence, for example in relation to receiving receipts, were accepted in such an emergency situation. This has been recognised by the delivery team as potentially unavoidable due to the exceptional circumstances in which the fund was operating. Process changes resulted in a lack of overall consistency in procedures, but they did facilitate the emergency response.

### ***Conclusions***

The RRGF supported 121 beneficiaries across the UK with a range of projects covering diversification, provision of seafood meals and increasing the sale of local seafood. Funding was well received, with appreciation expressed in survey responses and during interviews. Whilst there is ongoing uncertainty surrounding the Covid-19 situation, several beneficiaries commented that they have aspirations to continue with projects such as direct selling to consumers, or even grow new initiatives including home delivery. This suggests the RRGF has a longer-term impact beyond that of emergency support.