

Weston Charity Awards: Impact Evaluation

Executive summary

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Weston Charity
AWARDS



Foreword

There are dreamers and there are doers and in the charity sector, we need both.

This evaluation is a precious opportunity to see what a difference the right ingredients can make. After ten years of running the Weston Charity Awards, we can see how the programme of support that is on offer has so often had a transformative impact on the future trajectory of charities that take part, setting them up to help more people and to do more for the people they help.

Anyone who gives money to charity wants one thing, to give the charity more capacity to make a difference. But sometimes it is not money that makes the difference, but expertise. The Weston Charity Awards brings together the expertise of business and charity leaders, each learning from the other, each focused on how to help the charity to flourish.

In the field of capacity building, around the world, one form of impact is gold dust. This is where interventions have a lasting positive effect on the organisations that participate. This is the outstanding achievement of the Weston Charity Awards.

Over a ten year period, the evaluation looks at the experience of 145 charities – and moving on, we are now at 167. Almost all the charity leaders (96%) reporting back say that their charity is more operationally fit as a result of the support. Four out of five (83%) say that the improvements are still felt to this day.

Shortly after joining Pilotlight as the new Chair, I heard Emma Pears, Chief Executive of the children's charity SELFA (Skipton Extended Learning for All), speak about the impact on her charity. Emma reports that “in the seven years since we completed Pilotlight 360, we've kept moving forward - our income has increased threefold, we now have diverse and secure funding streams as well as clear financial planning. We are reaching more children and families than ever before.”

It is no surprise that the evaluators conclude that “the Weston Charity Awards are a unique programme of transformative support for charities.”

My warm thank you goes to those who took part in this evaluation, and to Inside Impact for their clear-eyed judgement and recommendations for the future of the programme. My thanks to the businesses and individuals we work with who are our Pilotlighters, skilled volunteers, in the programme.

Above all, I want to thank the Garfield Weston Foundation, its trustees and its team, for helping to make the Awards programme happen. At a time of need for charities, for the dreamers and for the doers, our partnership is gold dust.



Alison Forrestal
Chair, Pilotlight



Executive Summary

The Weston Charity Awards (WCA) are a unique programme of transformative support for charities. A partnership between Pilotlight and the Garfield Weston Foundation (GWF), the Awards have provided support to charities in targeted regions of the UK since its launch in 2014.

The WCA was established by Pilotlight and GWF to address a shared concern about the lack of support for charities outside London and the South of England. To tackle this, the WCA focused its support exclusively on charities in North England, the Midlands and Wales. Pilotlight and GWF aimed to level the playing field for charities in these regions by enhancing their fundraising capabilities and building their capacity to achieve even greater impact.

The programme is an unusual mix, combining an unrestricted grant, strategic mentorship from skilled volunteering professionals ('Pilotlighters') over a period of up to 12 months, and networking opportunities. Between 2014 and 2023, 145 charities have been Award winners and undertaken this support.

This impact evaluation examines the difference the programme has made to the charities involved and their leaders through four key evaluation questions.

Evaluation Question 1) What is the value of the WCA to its awardees as a uniquely combined programme?

Overall Value Delivered

The Awards have enhanced leadership capabilities, strengthened organisational resilience, and positively impacted the communities served by participating charities. The programme is unique in its combination of financial and non-financial support components and the fact it supports both personal leadership development alongside organisational development.

Charity leaders who participated are highly supportive of the value of the Awards. As a measure of their willingness to recommend it to others, they give an outstanding Net Promoter Score of 87 (the same level as for charities more widely who receive grants from GWF), suggesting they derive significant value from the programme as a whole. There were multiple instances of leaders actively promoting the Awards to their networks. The WCA is a vehicle for an enhanced reputation for both partners in the charity sector.

The responses of charity leaders in the evaluation surveys and interviews are generally overwhelmingly positive. One early Award winner said: *"I'm a huge fan of the programme. It's exactly what we needed and I think it helped us enormously to get to where we are now... Since I've been here turnover has trebled, staff team has doubled... we're on the up and up... and I think the programme had a huge part to play."*

Value of Award Components

When the evaluation looked at individual components, rather than the WCA as a whole, each element is valued differently and contributes to different outcomes.



Award Component	Findings
Pilotlighter support	This is the most valuable aspect of the award, valued by 99% of charity leaders still in place. Pilotlighters are held in high esteem by many charity leaders keen to access commercial expertise. They provide validation for leaders, expertise, a neutral party to bridge CEOs and their Boards, and work effectively as ‘critical friends’ for those leaders with growth mindsets. Thirty-eight per cent are still in touch with at least one Pilotlighter to date, with some Pilotlighters becoming trustees and donors for the charities.
Unrestricted £6,500 grant	Valued by 98% , the grant is hugely appreciated given the difficulty in securing unrestricted funds. Some used it to enable their participation through travel costs or salary contribution; others used it to develop their charity such as acquiring a new CRM; others felt they could have participated without it, but the grant ‘legitimised’ them spending time and energy on the programme. It is also what attracts most people to the award initially, even if it transpires to be slightly less valuable than Pilotlighter support overall.
Launch event	Valued by 72% , the launch event helps set expectations, provide ideas on how the programme can be used, facilitates networking, and opens space to discuss ‘fear factors’. As much as some leaders enjoyed the event, they felt they were being pitched something they had already bought into and were keen to commence work instead.
Celebratory event	Valued by 89% , this event brought a neat closure to the programme and many enjoyed their time at Fortnum & Mason in London. They enjoyed meeting the GWF family, felt valued by the partners, and appreciated time celebrating with Pilotlighters and their charity peers.
Peer-to-peer “Connect Sessions”	Valued by 83% , leaders found these sessions useful for making connections, hearing different approaches to challenges, and realising they are not alone. As much as the opportunities were valued, several leaders explained that networking opportunities are not unique to the WCA.
Raised profile from being an award winner	Valued by 70% , this was the area where expectation and reality differed the most, with more people finding it very attractive than very valuable. The WCA brand was repeatedly described as ‘prestigious’, recognised and respected in the charity sector, bringing credibility to organisations associated with it. Some had great success leveraging the profile including attracting additional funding and bringing media attention to their cause, whereas others were unable to make the most due to limited time or resource.

Evaluation Question 2) What is the comprehensive impact of the WCA?

Enduring Impact and Key Achievements

The WCA is achieving impressively positive outcomes for both charity leaders and their organisations, with most of the planned outcomes still being experienced today, even by the



2014 cohort, a decade later. This enduring impact is perhaps the most distinctive evidence of the value of the programme in unlocking lasting potential in the charities that benefit from the Awards. Since the impact of many funding programmes can diminish over time ('drop-off'), sustaining these long-term outcomes is widely regarded as a critical indicator of success for capacity building initiatives such as the Awards. For those that experienced these outcomes at *any* point during or after the WCA, the results are even higher, up to 98% for some.

Outcome for Charity Leaders	Experienced At Some Point	Continues To This Day
Better able to see things from a different perspective	96%	83%
Feeling like a more effective leader	92%	81%
Better able to critically analyse their own thoughts	94%	79%
Have improved self-confidence	92%	72%
Feeling better equipped for success	94%	68%
Feeling more resilient	90%	67%

Outcome for Charities	Experienced At Some Point	Continues To This Day
More operationally fit	96%	83%
Clearer on the organisation's purpose	91%	77%
Have more effective leadership (senior staff and Board)	98%	77%
Better able to deliver impact	91%	69%
Better able to identify external threats and opportunities	92%	69%
Better able to communicate impact	89%	64%
More financially fit	82%	57%

The only areas where outcomes were not sustained by the majority to this day were around feeling networked to other charities, and a raised profile from the award (though all were still experienced by the majority at some point).

When charity leaders were asked why they gave the programme the evaluation scores that they did, the most common reason was the positive impact it had on the charity:

- ▲ *"Was a fantastic positive experience and still having impact now"*
- ▲ *"It can make a huge difference to your charity"*
- ▲ *"Because of the significant positive impact."*



Managing Trade-offs and Unmet Need

Negative outcomes for charity leaders were limited and generally aligned with expected trade-offs, such as increased workload or more uncomfortable conversations. Most leaders saw these as necessary for meaningful results ("no pain, no gain"), though a couple of



isolated cases revealed misalignment or unmet needs. These instances highlight opportunities to clarify the programme's scope and better support unexpected changes. Overall, challenges were considered manageable and worthwhile, with no significant harm identified.

In rare instances when projects 'fail' there is still learning: for the charities, Pilotlighters or the partners. Short-term 'failures' such as trustees or CEOs leaving because of tensions in the process, can be long-term successes for organisations that then have more cohesive teams.

Evaluation Question 3) What specific changes can be linked to the WCA?

Organisational survival and growth: A notable number of charities attributed increases in income, reserves, staff, reach, impact, and quality of services at least in part to the WCA. For some, the programme was transformational, with one leader stating it made the difference between their charity's survival and closure.

Good management: Award winners are more likely than the whole charity sector to report that they have good management practices currently in place. Nearly half of the charities attributed the creation or improvement of key strategic documents to their participation in the WCA, including: a strategic plan, a business plan for the current year that contains measurable goals or objectives, an up-to-date statement of values, mission and values, and a theory of change.

Positive community impact: Many leaders credited the WCA with enabling their organisations to deliver more services, improve quality, and better meet community needs. These outcomes were achieved for most despite external challenges such as the pandemic and economic pressures, which, in some cases, limited potential impact.

Increased income: An analysis of 117 WCA charities using Charity Commission data from Find That Charity found that median income increased over time. Even after adjusting for inflation, income rose from the pre-award year to the award year and again in the post-award year. However, the analysis could not determine the extent to which increases were attributable to the WCA.

Despite this, several charity leaders shared in surveys and interviews that the WCA had helped increase income opportunities: *"Through the support and facilitation of the Pilotlighter, our income has increased year on year."* Pilotlight's own impact reporting on income levels after receiving Pilotlighter support echoes the findings of the Charity Commission financial analysis.

Whilst there are also examples of income stagnating or even falling in the Charity Commission data, charity leaders tended to attribute negative external factors as barriers to growth rather than any negative effects of the WCA.

Evaluation Question 4) Does the impact of the WCA align with the desired impact the partners aspired to create?

Values: The support provided through the Award is highly praised for reflecting the values of both partners. Charity leaders rated each value between 96% and 100% as 'fully met', showing a strong alignment. GWF's core principles of respect (100%), humility (96%), and trust (98%) are consistently upheld, while Pilotlight's focus on bringing people together



(96%), believing in potential (96%), and expecting the best (98%) is clearly reflected in the programme's approach. This demonstrates a shared ethos and a well-matched partnership in terms of how impact is delivered.

Partnership alignment in impact: Leaders from both GWF and Pilotlight agreed that the WCA appeared to meet their respective desired impact. Both had been able to expand their geographic reach beyond London and the Southeast, and both had seen evidence of charities becoming stronger and better equipped to make good quality grant applications through the WCA. GWF did however acknowledge that levels of applicants to their main grants from different geographic regions still fluctuate, leaving the question: **is there still more that can be done to level the geographic playing field for charities?**

Sustained Impact and Engagement

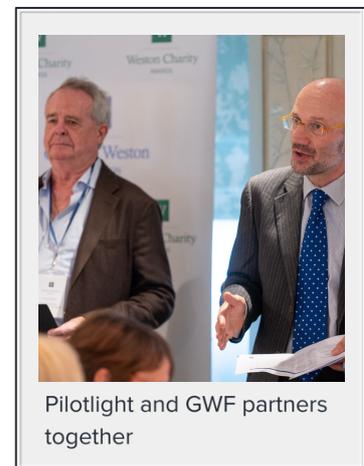
The unique strength of the WCA is that it combines both organisational development with leadership development, often involving trustees, senior colleagues and other staff as appropriate through the programme. The evaluation was able to learn from charity leaders the impact on both them and their charities. However, the evaluation faced challenges not being able to reach WCA charity leaders who had left, and only reached a small number of organisations where someone could speak on behalf of the WCA charity leader that had left, potentially leaving some experiences unrepresented. This evaluation was not able to fully answer the question, **“What happens to the benefits when charity leaders leave?”**

The Future of the WCA and the Partnership

The partnership's long-standing nature and the commitment of the partners to their respective visions, missions and unique strengths, combined with the stability of three-year funding agreements have contributed to the success of the programme. Both partners require each other to make delivery of the programme possible. For Pilotlight, the 'critical mass' of the WCA is also what keeps their Pilotlight 360 programme feasible. Both partners see a continued need among charities for the work of the WCA.

Charity leaders highlighted two key areas for future support: the opportunity to reapply for or rerun the WCA after a few years, recognising its value at different stages of organisational growth, and increased access to unrestricted funding to address rising costs and sustain services. Suggestions also included developing an active alumni network to foster connections, longer-term support for leaders, and initiatives to help diversify income streams.

While there are a handful of similar programmes delivered to the charity sector, such as by the Lloyds Bank Foundation for England & Wales, the WCA remains a unique package and achieves remarkable outcomes for most participants, even if the process itself can be challenging. **The Awards have the potential to be replicated by other organisations willing to make the investment and able to find appropriate partners to collaborate with.**



Pilotlight and GWF partners together



Recommendations for Future Development

1. **Expand evaluation reach:** Develop mechanisms to maintain contact with past leaders for follow-up impact data and improve representation in future evaluations.
2. **Enhance support to leverage profile:** Provide additional resources or training to help charities maximise the benefits of increased visibility.
3. **Sustain organisational benefits beyond leadership tenure:** Explore mechanisms to institutionalise learning and impact, ensuring continuity regardless of leadership changes.
4. **Strengthen alumni networks:** Establish formal alumni programmes to sustain relationships among participants and with Pilotlight and GWF.
5. **Adapt to external challenges:** Continue to ensure future iterations of the WCA are responsive to evolving external pressures, offering additional resources or flexibility to address these challenges.

Conclusion

The Weston Charity Awards exemplify strategic philanthropy, combining financial investment with skilled volunteering to create transformative change. Many programme outcomes are sustained for years beyond the programme's completion, demonstrating its long-term impact. A key factor in the programme's success lies in the strong partnership between Pilotlight and GWF, which integrates their complementary expertise, resources and values. This collaboration ensures a holistic and tailored approach, making the WCA uniquely effective in strengthening leadership and organisational resilience.

On behalf of the
Weston Charity Award partners



Garfield Weston
FOUNDATION

pilotlight

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