



RETURN ON INVESTMENT IN COMMUNITY CONSERVATION: Measuring the impact of the Community Coordination and Facilitation grant

Photo credit: Paul Whitfield, Urban Ark Manawa Taiao Trust



BACKGROUND

Auckland Council's Environmental Services recognises the immense value of community-led conservation. Community groups can achieve long-term, large-scale results that are more resilient to funding and political changes than projects led solely by government agencies. To strengthen and support these groups, we invest in key leadership, coordination, and specialist roles through the Community Coordination and Facilitation (CCF) grant.

Launched in the 2018/19 financial year (FY) with funding from the Regional Natural Environment Targeted Rate (NETR), the CCF is a contestable grant, meaning community groups must apply, and funding is awarded through a competitive process. Successful groups receive funding to spend on agreed activities, enabling them to strengthen their conservation delivery.

Since its establishment, across six financial years, \$3.25 million has been allocated through 124 grants in partnership with Healthy Waters and Water Quality Targeted Rate funding. In 2025, the CCF grant was merged with the Regional Environment and Natural Heritage (RENH) grant, but its purpose remained unchanged.

To ensure this investment delivers strong outcomes, we assessed the impact of the CCF grant.

What roles can CCF fund?

While most people think of community conservation funding supporting fieldwork, behind-the-scenes roles are just as crucial. Pest Free Kaipātiki Restoration Society used their CCF grant to fund a skilled Finance Manager, covering 983 hours of work. This role transformed their financial management streamlining processes, improving reporting accuracy, and strengthening strategic planning. More importantly, it freed up ecological staff to focus on what they do best – restoring nature. With stronger financial systems in place, the group mobilised 9,101 volunteer hours, achieving an ROI of \$4.73. The Finance Manager also played a key role in securing additional funding and supporting long-term sustainability.

"The Finance Manager position, funded through the grant, was pivotal in transforming our financial management, improving operational efficiency, and freeing up ecological staff to focus on their core restoration work." – Pest Free Kaipātiki



ANALYSIS

Our analysis focused on the FY2022/23 CCF funding round, with activities delivered in FY2023/24 and reporting completed in October 2024.

During this period:

- \$1,012,215 was invested in 36 community groups
- 22,284 paid coordinator hours were funded (plus additional activities)
- 276,431 volunteer hours were reported through planting, weeding, and other activities

Return on Investment calculation

We used a simplified return on investment (ROI) approach, using volunteer hours as a proxy for value. Volunteer time was valued at the living wage of \$26/hour (as adopted by Auckland Council for the FY2023/24). ROI was calculated using the following formula:

$$Return = \frac{V_f - V_i}{V_i}$$

V_f = final value gained as a result of the project
 V_i = value of investment

Coordinator-to-Volunteer Ratio calculation

We also examined the ratio of paid coordinator hours to free volunteer hours generated. This metric helps assess whether the CCF is achieving its primary goal: funding roles that enable volunteers to contribute their time and labour at no cost. The ratio was calculated by dividing the total volunteer hours by the total paid coordinator hours:

$$Ratio = \frac{T_{vol}}{T_{paid}}$$

T_{vol} = total time worked by unpaid volunteers (hours)
 T_{paid} = total time worked by people in paid roles (hours)



RESULTS

ROI results

The overall ROI was \$6.10, meaning that **for every \$1 invested, the CCF grant generated \$6.10 of value in volunteer labour.**

- The median ROI was \$3.20, with a range from -\$0.54 to \$49.32.
- Excluding three high outliers (over \$17.00) adjusted ROI to \$3.86, confirming that the result of \$6.10 remained a reasonable estimate.

Coordinator-to-Volunteer Ratio results

The overall ratio was 12.4 hours, meaning that **for every 1 paid coordinator hour, groups generated 12.4 volunteer hours.**

- The median ratio was 8.0, with a range from 0.9 to 105.5 hours.
- Removing three high outliers (over 38 hours) adjusted the ratio to 9.32 hours, reinforcing that 12.4 remained a reasonable estimate.

For context, a 2013 Auckland Council study of the Auckland Museum's Moana - My Ocean exhibition found an ROI of \$4.66. However, that study accounted for social benefits such as visitor experience and educational value. In contrast, our analysis focused solely on volunteer hours, meaning the actual ROI for CCF could be higher.

<https://knowledgeauckland.org.nz/media/1531/tr2014-014-measuring-the-value-created-by-auckland-museum-s-moana-my-ocean-exhibition-a-sroi-analysis.pdf>

How do groups maximise return on investment?

Friends of Te Wairoa used their CCF funding to support a coordinator, who played a key role in mobilising volunteers and expanding local conservation efforts. With just 458 paid coordinator hours, the group generated 11,000 volunteer hours – an impressive 24 to 1 ratio – delivering pest control, weed removal, and restoration projects across the catchment. Their ROI of \$14.51 shows the incredible value of investing in coordination roles. One standout success was the crack willow eradication project, which secured strong community buy-in and reached 500 households – one in four in the catchment. Without the grant, their pest control programme would have ceased, putting five years of progress at risk. Instead, the coordinator provided expert guidance, empowering residents to take action on their own land.

"Our coordinator plays a crucial role in empowering residents to take action on pest control, revegetation, and ecosystem restoration on their properties. This year alone, we expanded our reach by 15%, bringing more landowners into the programme. The freely available, local advice provided through this role has been invaluable – giving residents the knowledge and confidence to respond quickly and effectively, improving restoration efforts across the entire catchment." – Friends of Te Wairoa



INTERPRETING THE RESULTS: LIMITATIONS AND INSIGHTS

While the ROI and Coordinator-to-Volunteer Ratio demonstrate strong results, there are limitations to consider. Results varied widely across groups, with some reporting a negative ROI. To better understand these discrepancies, we are conducting an internal review to refine our approach in future funding rounds.

The primary cause of this variation appears to be due to inconsistencies in data collection and reporting, rather than differences in group performance. Groups that reviewed their reports often found and corrected errors, increasing the recorded number of volunteer hours. This suggests that volunteer contributions were likely underreported. In particular, more established conservation groups that support smaller volunteer groups may not have fully captured all activities run by their members. Additionally, due to limitations in the reporting form, attendance at some conservation activities was recorded as a simple headcount, without specifying time spent. To ensure consistency, we used a conservative estimate of one hour per participant, though some activities, such as planting days, lasted longer. These findings highlight the need for clearer reporting processes, which we will refine to improve accuracy.

Furthermore, our ROI estimation was intentionally conservative as it excluded broader benefits such as ecological improvements (e.g., planted trees, restored habitats) and social outcomes (e.g., increased community cohesion and wellbeing). Given the complexity and resources required to quantify these benefits, we chose to focus on a straightforward and measurable indicator – volunteer hours – while recognising that the true benefits are likely higher.

However, we acknowledge that the CCF grant is not the sole funding source for many groups, and some coordinator roles may have received support from other sources, such as Local Board funding. However, CCF is one of the few grants in New Zealand specifically designed to fund leadership, coordination, and specialist roles. Most other grants fund project activities or resources, rather than the roles needed to manage them. Given this, it is unlikely that groups received substantial additional funding for these positions, allowing us to reasonably attribute all reported volunteer hours to the roles funded by the CCF grant.

Overall, while this approach has limitations – particularly the assumption that all reported volunteer hours stem from CCF-funded roles, which may overstate the ROI – it is also conservative because of underreported volunteer hours and the exclusion of ecological and social benefits, meaning the true impact could be greater. This method provides a practical and reliable indicator of the CCF grant's impact.



CONCLUSION

The CCF analysis demonstrated a significant return, with an ROI of \$6.10 and a Coordinator-to-Volunteer Ratio of 12.4 hours. This shows that investing in leadership and coordination roles enables community groups to maximise volunteer contributions. While the analysis has some limitations, the findings provide a strong indication of CCF's positive impact on community-led conservation.



"With significant untapped volunteer potential, it is increasingly clear that funding more coordinator hours leads to greater volunteer outputs. Coordinators play a crucial role in increasing the chances of volunteer groups forming and successfully starting work in an area."
– Upper Waitemātā Ecology Network