BETTER TOGETHER POLICY FORUM: 17th June 2025

VALUING AND SUPPORTING A THRIVING VCSE:

What does good grant making look like?

The following notes are transcribed from comments and points raised and noted during the Round Table discussions.

These notes also include feedback from "Messages from the VCSE to Commissioners" and "Messages from Commissioners to the VCSE".

ROUND TABLE DISCUSSIONS

QUESTION 1

Relationships between funders and VCSE recipients: What does good funding look like and what are the ingredients which make a good relationship?

Transparency and facilitation of debates and conversations between applicants and decision makers.
Enable better links between (VCSE) organisations in local geographies, facilitated by funders.
Need for better alignment within the sector (those with similar objectives) to share resources and support.
Soft data gathering (e.g. patient experience) is more useful for funders than quantitative information. Helps public sector (NHS) understand impacts and needs better.
Relationships between grant makers and recipients/ physical visits to projects/ more flexible approach.
Risks of AI and how sectors might use it: good/bad?
Make better use of AAP /LANS to join up organisations and foster better alignment.
An Accord should reflect alignment and links between VCSE provider organisations.
Good communication between funder and recipient: phone, emails, Teams, etc with identified and consistent point of contact.
Access to training to support applications. Community support- help to articulate ideas and address skills/knowledge gaps. Training in funding via DCA to provide examples of questions and how to respond/articulate a case.
Simplify the (application) process. Does the funder already know the statistics for that area?
Prioritise need over criteria.
Access to a best practice forum.
Early conversations with funders to identify community need.
Flexibility: Service may change e.g. Big Lottery happy to adapt and flex project funding to accommodate changed needs/approaches.
Funders want to fund good project which can be re-funded to achieve longer term benefits.
Need more core funding for staff costs/salaries.
Time scales for funding could be better.
Match funding can be difficult to align with grants and timescales.
Reporting requirements can be disproportionate to the level of funding applied for.

Trust and openness between funder and recipient. Strong culture of partnership.

Recipient can regard funder as a project rather than a partner.

Check each other's core aims for consistency.

Funders to fund where needs are and work responsively: recognising the value of volunteers and the VCSE as providers.

Clarity & reality around timescales. Context e.g. short local interventions vs culture of change

Funders recognise differences: Local (area is better known & understood) vs nationally funded projects (scale and tendency to be prescriptive)

Light touch on project applications with stronger communications.

Longer term funding.

Clear expectations on all sides.

Connectivity in relationships: visits can make projects pop into life.

Not transactional: work together with the same goals.

Ask for support and collaboration.

Longer term funding and unrestricted funding alongside advice and support to enable better planning (funder as enabler?) Funding for core costs: staffing, back office

Hands off/positive approach

Funders can establish better trusting basis by asking probing questions at the start (mutual learning)

Multiyear, strategic investment funding for VCSE core support, trusting VCSE to deliver services which meet local needs

Investment into the sector as a whole (strategic funding budget as for public sector agencies) to enable long term delivery of local services.

Like to get feedback on unsuccessful applications.

Online applications are great, but clarity needed on what's needed e.g. what is required up front such as quotes or invoices etc.

Good to be in a network with people from both sides of experience.

Phrase (application form) questions in an empathetic way.

Confidence in the relationship so questions can be asked when stuck.

Training for volunteers in funding.

Adopt a passport model for organisations applying for grants: core data and organisational information to be held in "user profiles" so that applicants aren't having to repeat information in applications over and again.

Trust, respect, research: Funders need to retain monitoring for light touch.

Scope: Larger county-wide & regional organisations need shared strategic goals across geography. AAP funding doesn't work for county-wide organisations.

Funders priorities don't always align with each other, so joint funding would require monitoring to fit.

Restructuring in public sector (e.g. ICB) makes access unclear and hard to navigate.

Lots of duplications in funders asks of the sector.

Disproportionate level of grant awards to information required (admin, monitoring etc) puts VCSE orgs. off from applying.

DCC is trusting in relationships with VCSE.

Good funders researched organisations before establishing relationships. Can providers come together to invest e.g. housing.

Funding information (email/online/meet the funder)

Funders don't have the capacity or will to micromanage VCSE organisations.

ESV Volunteering helps build cross sector relationships.

Build picture with funders about areas where it is more difficult to apply for help (lack of skills and resources to make applications)

Further conversations needed about more than one grant per organisation.

Support brokerage between organisations so that larger organisations can support and fund smaller ones in their areas, and manage the admin.

Agree what reports on Impacts should look like and their value and format.

Better mutual understanding needed about referrals into services, how they are monitored and who benefits (people centred reporting)

Funders to be bolder in funding pilots/testing projects to explore challenges and risks and learn from mistakes. Collaboration on developing longer term projects from lessons learned (on all sides) from piloted work and investment. (more exploration of innovation and risk)

QUESTION 2.

REPORTING OUTCOMES/IMPACTS: Effective formats and insights into successes and challenges.

Politics has too much sway.

Case studies: Really effective

Don't ask too much, enough evidence that the project delivers.

AAPs are too long winded. Onerous monitoring, too time consuming.

Inconsistent across (AAP) panels in terms of support for project ideas.

Word cloud model / You asked this, we did this: approach.

Move away from written word to (more use of) camera.

Training for funders so they are more realistic about costs for running projects (training, insurances, back office etc)

Social Value: Could Point North help us with this, to use AI? Need to demonstrate locally to compete nationally.

Funders ask providers how they can/want to evidence their outcomes/impacts.

Application of social value tools and impact reports.

Central recording system that provides an ongoing picture of performance: web based with central coordination, or as an app.

Difficult to measure impacts for prevention and long-term changes when working with individual clients, so a better understanding between funders and VCSE of how outcomes for prevention are reported and tracked would help.

Avoid "drama," "crisis" and "stigma": too many funders want to see evidence of huge change; however, the aim of the work is to prevent and avoid crisis.

Every suicide cost £14m from "incubation" to impacts on others. Needs to be considered as prevention could redirect funds into a more positive and impactful approach to mental health and wellbeing.

(VCSE always) time pressured, so varying formats (for reporting) work well.

Some outcomes are more tangible than others.

Enable anonymised reports /pictures speak a thousand words.

Where do we capture added value? An "Other" section? Not all outcomes can be (so neatly) captured.

Asking vulnerable people to sign forms is a big ask.

Trust the process.

Need to fund staff time to do the monitoring

Would welcome a chat and a visit to show round organisations to see impacts.

(We) developed own monitoring for all of the organisation, that should be accepted more (widely).

Sometimes shoehorned into collecting data you don't need.

Understand the need for public funding to be managed but sometimes the same requirements are for grants of £500 and £5000. (Need for nuance)

Monitoring forms with restricted word counts- tick box exercise.

Organisations need to know that funders have read the reports.

Could big organisations help smaller groups to create videos /podcasts (via ESV?)

TOMs framework doesn't work for the sector

Numbers are there to support but narrative is important.

Believe will do 360-degree learning from monitoring reports.

No spreadsheet monitoring

DCC trusts us to deliver

Mutually agreed reporting for each contract.

Could usefully look at monitoring how we work in the system as well as what we deliver.

Understanding why funders are asking and consider Ai benefits for data.

Reporting failures / challenges is not a bad use of public funding.

Need to explore referrals more widely.

QUESTION 3.

ALIGNMENT IN FUNDING: How do you see funders connecting and collaborating with other funders in the County?

Cost benefit analysis (grant giving overheads and impacts)

Networking where relevant. Signposting to other organisations to work in partnership.

Organisational development (for staff) to have better understanding about challenges faced by charities/VCSE.

Develop additional networking for County to align priorities and reach.

Point North works with others

How does the ICB fund? We could see where the CCGs were funding.

DCA provides training & support

Projects merging

Some local authorities are giving grants rather than contracts.

There are lots of partnerships and relationships in place – well supported in this collective.

Freeing time for "thinking space" ahead of funding bids.

Time is needed to network and plan.

Can funders be more proactive to link funding or at least to link VCSE applications.

Every organisation is busy/working collaboratively would help.

It comes down to governance and trust.

Karbon & 13 Housing: grant fund for a community farm.

Signposting is key - linking to partners.

Livin & social prescriber offer- bypass Dr. & link to connector.

Open communication/networking/know your partners.

Wildlife Trust Swift box Initiative: Believe constructed as a part of social value offer

Streamline funding through Point North so only one system, especially from DCC.

Need to remember that people who need help are at the end of the funding so don't want to bog them down with paperwork and barriers.

Stop protectionism

Look at issues in locality

Plymouth model around trust – needs led.
Is there a way of jointly funding something bigger/wider – countywide?
Can funders create a countywide pot? If funders can commit to working together, organisations can commit to working together to deliver services that meet the needs of the funders and the population we all serve.
Collaborative on both sides.
Match funding can be clunky
One application form shared across funders.
Capacity in VCSE.
Longer procurement processes / sufficient time for conversations / short term turnaround for bids / Funding not as good as it could be.

KEY MESSAGES…From VCSE to Funders

Consider reporting and how it should be done.
Outcomes: Consider how long some outcomes take and what is worth/useful measurement and why.
More money of course!
Simple, streamlined processes please and an understanding of the difficult environment which VCSE organisations operate in.
Visit us and get to know us.
Cut down on reporting and monitoring
Continuation and longer-term funding would be very welcome.
Penalised for having larger reserves.
Keep it simple
Keep monitoring to the absolute necessary.
Narratives & case studies are powerful and meaningful.
Umbrella organisations can manage funds for smaller funders grant monies.
Have organisations help apply for funding and deliver projects e.g. schools.
Lived experience voice?
Streamline DCC funding for the sector through Point North.
Do your research, drop in and see us.
Need to be more transparent about what funding is available, specifically from private trusts.
Need to scrutinise what is going out (funding)
Carry out some research which looks at impacts for people if services were not delivering or funded.
We need longer term commitment.
Relationships take time.
Give us kudos/make us a partner and believe in us because we do deliver!
Use Charity Commission for due diligence –
all info is there.
Commissioning and longer-term partnerships.
Simplify reporting.
Avoid jargon and be mindful of use of language (risk /innovation)
Ensure funding for needs led projects.

KEY MESSAGES…From Funders to VCSE

A wish for applicants to make contact throughout the bidding process.

Be aware that funders resources can be stretched, and each funder works differently.
Open and honest approach (especially when things go wrong)
Learn from mistakes
Share the impacts of your work- helps us all to have the bigger picture.
VCSE is doing a great job and shouldn't be forgotten.
Trust.
Get to know us! See us, meet with us.
Predictions are difficult - guesstimates are made.
Try not to be so harsh o new partners.
Costs per head is not so relevant now due to complex needs.
Be open to part funding options and discuss with us.
Smaller funders taking on larger grant givers' monitoring.