

RESEARCH INTO THE SUPPORT PROVIDED BY FUNDERS TO VCSE ORGANISATIONS WITH DATA AND EVIDENCE WORK

AVAN WADIA
DIANA PARKINSON

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

The Big Lottery Fund commissioned NCVO Charities Evaluation Services to carry out research into the support provided by other funders to VCSE organisations in the UK with their data and evidence work.

In-depth interviews were carried out with ten funders whose perspectives reflect different types of support as well as what has worked well, some of the challenges they faced and the learning that has emerged from providing this support.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- **What types of organisations** are being offered support and does this support vary across different organisations?
- **Which areas** of data and evidence work are funders supporting?
- **What type of support** are funders providing?
- **How much support** is being offered and who is providing it?
- **What has worked well** and not worked well in terms of offering support?
- **What are the barriers and enablers** to organisations making best use of support?

PARTICIPANTS

- Arts Council England
- Comic Relief
- The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation
- Guy's & St. Thomas' Charity
- The Nationwide Foundation
- The Paul Hamlyn Foundation
- Spirit of 2012
- Sport England
- The Tudor Trust
- Trust for London

RESEARCH STRATEGY



Desk research

To situate the research within the wider context of support provided by funders.



Online questionnaire

To gather preliminary information from funders on the amount and type of support they provided.



Telephone interviews

To probe and explore funders' experiences and views in depth.

FINDINGS

WHICH ORGANISATIONS FUNDERS WERE SUPPORTING

- All the funders we interviewed were providing support to their own grantees and some also provided support to organisations who were applying to them for funding.
- The types of organisation supported by funders tended to reflect their funding priorities.

'Young women affected by gangs was somewhere we put in a lot more resource [for organisations] to do the learning course because we thought that was a really interesting area with not much work done around it. So there's base level support across all grantees but then it increases depending on the money we're able to secure with other funders or how interesting we think that piece of work might be in terms of learning.'

WHICH ASPECTS OF DATA AND EVIDENCE WORK FUNDERS WERE SUPPORTING

- All funders were supporting organisations to **design monitoring tools** or **improve their data collection** processes and almost all were supporting organisations to **clarify their outputs, outcomes and impact**.
- The majority of funders provided support with **commissioning evaluations or research** as well as with carrying out **data analysis and reporting**.
- Over half were helping organisations to **compare their results** with those of others or supporting organisations with **data systems or storage**.
- Only one funder was helping organisations to **use open data** resources to improve their research, intelligence and planning.

HOW FUNDERS WERE PROVIDING SUPPORT

- All the funders we interviewed were providing either **one-to-one support** or **funding** for data and evidence work, or a combination of both.
- The majority were also providing **resources** and **bringing organisations together** to share issues or learning.
- Less than half were offering **training or e-learning** for organisations around data and evidence.
- Some were supporting organisations with **disseminating their learning** in order to influence change or encouraging organisations to think about their **monitoring, evaluation and learning** on an organisational level rather than individual project basis.

HOW MUCH SUPPORT FUNDERS PROVIDED

- Half the funders did not set specific limits for the amount of support they provided to individual organisations.
- However, two funders only made the support available to organisations within the set-up phase of the funded work.
- Two funders limited the amount of days of support available to organisations.

‘We do put a cap on the evaluation support provided by the consultant. We say it's up to two days advice plus all the expenses.’

‘We couldn't provide support across the whole grant period and our strategic decision was to put the effort into the start-up phase in the hope that you get it right then and it can set people up well for the rest of their project.’

WHAT WORKS WELL (1)

Providing individual, flexible and ongoing support enabled funders to address organisation's specific needs.

'The evaluation support scheme with the individual consultants is really appreciated because it's tailored advice to that individual organisation, their project, their needs and their staff.'

'The one-size-fits-all approach doesn't work. I think it needs to start with conversations or some way of really understanding what the needs of that particular organisation are around evaluation.'

WHAT WORKS WELL (2)

Providing support in the initial stages of funding enabled organisations to think about the purpose and value of evaluation.

'I think what worked well previously is when projects have had that initial support from us in terms of helping to really clarify the evaluation, so really understanding the purpose of the evaluation, who's the audience, what are the key lessons that are driving this evaluation, what's the theory of change.'

Nonetheless, providing support throughout the period of the grant was important in enabling grantees to explore what their data was telling them and to identify learning from this.

'It's about the support the organisation will need all the way through the journey.'

WHAT WORKS WELL (3)

Bringing together organisations at similar stages of development or those funded as part of specific initiatives through training and events was particularly effective.

'The grantees that were in the session were all about the same maturity, and it felt like there was a very good learning attitude in there.'

'The smaller groups really valued it and got a lot out of it, and that upskilling them, and having somebody behind them, supporting them doing, that was very well received.'

WHAT WORKS WELL (4)

Ensuring that support was directed at those with a strong commitment to learning was also important.

'It doesn't seem to matter what size the organisation is. It's more around their ethos and particularly their comfort with reporting on what's not going to work as well as what is, seeing the evaluation not as a proof, but as a learning thing.'

Equally, providing opportunities for peer support was valuable in enabling organisations to share their experiences and improve their work.

'Where we have brought projects together regularly ... they've been able to openly and honestly talk about challenges and share experiences and support each other, that's really helpful. I've seen learning and reflection and development in action in that kind of forum.'

CHALLENGES (1)

Funders have struggled to allocate sufficient resources to provide intensive, bespoke support to VCSE organisations.

'It's an expensive model. I think it's great that the grantees have that specialist support and I think that is what is working well but we need to weigh that with whether we can carry on in the future.'

'It's trying to make it as bespoke as possible but having the spread and being bespoke, that's the challenge ... That is expensive, so you have to be selective about how you do that.'

CHALLENGES (2)

Funders have also found that some organisations lack the capacity to engage with the work and embed the learning.

'We're often talking to small volunteer-led organisations and there's only a certain amount that is possible and reasonable to expect.'

'We want to make sure that they're able to look at the data and what's interesting for them, as well as fulfilling a reporting requirement.'

WAYS TO ENHANCE THE SUPPORT (1)

The funders we interviewed felt that organisations would benefit from more support with data analysis and reporting.

'We've been very good at the design and some of the collection stuff. We haven't provided support around the other points, such as the analysis... I'd like to be able to develop something around that, that works through that whole process.'

They also felt it was important to provide support that enabled organisations to learn from their work on an ongoing basis rather than only at the end of the funding.

'[We should support] learning as an experience as you go through a project and making it a reflective experience through things like learning workshops.'

WAYS TO ENHANCE THE SUPPORT (2)

Some funders felt that greater collaboration between funders would support a more coherent approach to organisations' data and evidence work. In particular, some funders felt that it would be useful for funders to discuss what evidence is required from organisations or to collaborate in the provision of support.

'As a funding sector, we need better co-operation with each other. We work far too much in isolation and this is one of the areas which is right for us to work together with other foundations and grant-givers, because we can share the burden of resourcing and skills.'

CONCLUSION (1)

This research is based on a small sample of funders and the findings cannot, therefore, be seen to be representative of the views and experiences of all funders in the UK. Nonetheless, it provides an insight into the ways in which some funders are supporting VCSE organisations with data and evidence work, as well as revealing the learning from their experiences of providing this support.

Overall, the research highlights the need for funders to provide ongoing support with core aspects of data and evidence work as well as to provide increased support with specific aspects such as data analysis, management, reporting and sharing.

CONCLUSION (2)

The findings also suggest that organisations need tailored support, that empowers organisations to collect data that is meaningful to them and which enhances their ability to learn and report to their funders. Equally, the research suggests that there is value in bringing organisations together to share their experiences and learn from each other.

There is also clearly a desire for funders to collaborate more so that the provision of support with data and evidence work can become more joined-up. This presents the BLF with an opportunity to take the lead in developing support for VCSE organisations that will have a meaningful impact on the VCSE sector.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPING SUPPORT FOR THE VCSE SECTOR (1)

- **A range of support options** should be provided to meet the different needs and preferences of VCSE organisations with their data and evidence work including
 - **Individual, tailored support** that addresses the specific needs of organisations around data and evidence work
 - **Training** that enables organisations to access support with core aspects of data and evidence work as well as with more specialist areas around data analysis, reporting and using open data
 - **Signposting** that enables organisations to access resources specific to their sector and needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPING SUPPORT FOR THE VCSE SECTOR (2)

- **Support with evaluation planning** as there is clearly an ongoing need for support with fundamental aspects of data and evidence work such as clarifying outcomes and designing monitoring tools.
- Provide more support with **specific aspects of data and evidence work**, particularly around data analysis, management, reporting and sharing to enable VCSE organisations to draw out and make use of the learning to emerge from their data and evidence work.
- **Provide ongoing support** in order to meet organisations' needs at different stages of development and to promote learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPING SUPPORT FOR THE VCSE SECTOR (3)

- **Peer support** through networking and learning workshops should be facilitated to encourage organisations to share learning from their data and evidence work.
- **Funding should be provided to networks and infrastructure organisations** to provide support with data and evidence work to organisations in their sectors.
- **Greater collaboration** between funders should be developed in order to share ideas and resources as well as to offer shared support for VCSE organisations.
- **Further research** should be carried out to explore which VCSE organisations are accessing support, where the gaps lie and how these might best be addressed.

POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS FOR THE BLF (1)

- **Commission research** to explore the experiences of VCSE organisations in accessing support with their data and evidence work.
- **Convene a group of funders** to discuss these findings and explore ideas for collaboration.
- **Pilot new peer support groups** to bring together organisations within sub-sectors or strategic initiatives to help them develop their data and evidence work.
- **Develop new resources** to support organisations with data analysis, management, reporting and sharing such as webinars, or bringing organisations together in action-learning sets.
- **Ensure that the BLF's website** clearly signposts VCSE organisations to high-quality existing resources such as those provided by Inspiring Impact.

POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS FOR THE BLF (2)

- **Review the skills of current staff** within the BLF and provide training where needed to ensure all grant officers have a thorough understanding of data and evidence work.
- **Consider providing free open-access training** to organisations, whether or not they are funded by the BLF, to develop their skills and knowledge in core aspects of data and evidence work.
- **Organise an event** to share learning that is emerging from work being done by VCSE organisations who are involving individuals with lived experience in data and evidence work.
- **Consider developing a theory of change** for the work that BLF decides to undertake in this area and using this to create monitoring and evaluation systems that will enable the BLF to assess progress and impact of this work.

About NCVO Charities Evaluation Services

NCVO Charities Evaluation Services (NCVO CES) is the leading evaluation consultancy for the voluntary sector. Over the last 26 years we have worked with tens of thousands of voluntary organisations, their funders and commissioners, helping them improve their effectiveness. We do this through:

- external evaluations
- building organisational capacity in monitoring and evaluation
- tailored training
- developing resources and toolkits designed to meet organisations' needs.

ncvo.org.uk/charities-evaluation-services

NCVO
Society Building
8 All Saints Street
London N1 9RL
020 7713 6161
ncvo@ncvo.org.uk
Registered charity number 225922