

The Equity Programme

Community led grant making

During the summer of 2020, Corra Foundation received £150,000 from Stewart Investors to develop grant-making focussing on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups who were adversely affected by the coronavirus pandemic. This was split into a Proactive Fund which provided 30 grants of between £1-2000 to organisations to support immediate responses, and a community-led Grant-making Fund which aimed to give groups power over decision making throughout the whole process.

This insight piece looks specifically at the community-led aspect of the funding.

What we did

We co-opted a small team from across the Foundation – colleagues from our Place team, our Grants team and our Policy & Communications Team. The team’s skills, knowledge and insight were broad ranging and allowed us to think differently, develop a programme organically, learn and adapt to what we were hearing from groups.

We spoke with Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic network and umbrella organisations to help guide us towards communities and organisations that might want to work with us on the programme. BEMIS, Next Step Initiative and CEMVO all generously gave us their time. We also spoke with organisations we knew through our existing grant-making, through our own networks and those we had developed relationships with through the proactive grant-making.

Eventually we settled on a range of different groups and organisations to develop Community-led grant-making with. These were:

- A group of Roma and Romanian community members in Fife, supported by Fife Migrants Forum.
- A group of Bengali Women in Edinburgh and the Lothians who had newly formed to build connections, confidence and skills.
- A group of men looking at mental health with the support of MCASS (Minority Communities Addiction Support Service).
- A separate group of women looking at mental health with the support of MCASS (Minority Communities Addiction Support Service)
- A group of Black and People of Colour young people supported by Intercultural Youth Scotland.
- The various families, young people and community supported by Multi-Cultural Family Base in Edinburgh.

We also provided BEMIS with a grant of £10,000 which they were able to match fund, to support the continuation of a much needed culturally appropriate counselling service which had been developed through the summer of 2020.

What we are learning

Community-led, or Participatory Grant-making changes your role as funder. You are handing power over to people who are closer to the issues to make funding decisions. This means that occasionally you will have **your assumptions challenged** and gain new insights into what **success looks like**.

We have held a very **loose format** around the Equity Programme in order to see what **emerges naturally** for the communities. This has meant that some of the work looks quite different to our initial expectations. At Corra Foundation, our experience with both grant-making and our community-led Place team has meant we have developed, in some cases a hybrid funding/community development approach. Other groups have developed a more direct relationship with the funding, using it as a chance to think about what is important to the community and how the funding can best be used to support that. The key thing has been that each group has felt like they owned the process and that Corra were there to act as a supporter and guide if needed.

Pace and Timescales

Participatory or Community Led grant-making takes time. We found that it took us more time than we expected to get things moving and that different communities and organisations had different timescales that they were able to work to.

Working during **the Coronavirus pandemic** added the complication that we couldn't physically meet any of the groups, and many of them were only meeting online. The majority of the **set-up, partnership development and organisation** had to be online and over video conferencing, meaning some of the initial spend was on digital connectivity and devices to ensure people could take part.

The pace at which a community can work is dependent on:

- how well the group knows one another
- how used to working in this way they are
- how well formed their ideas are about what could be possible.

For some groups, this was entirely new to them, and they needed time to **develop a group identity and understanding** before they could consider how to work with any funding. For others, who were further away from traditional funding and who had never experienced being included in a funding process, confidence and capacity building was key, but this looked different for each group, and takes time to get right. Honesty on both sides about what is working well and what is needed is vital.

Roles and Relationships

We found that most of the groups needed to have at least one facilitator who was either **from the community, or well trusted by the group.**

Our role has been one of support, occasionally guidance – but most often as a curious friend. **Listening deeply and taking time to understand where people are** is important. Our team included people with rich backgrounds working with different communities, lived and learned experience that meant we could adapt to different needs.

However, we did find that occasionally stepping back to allow space for groups actually felt more unsafe, or uncertain for them. There is a **delicate balance** to be struck in this work between allowing people space to express their ideas and needs and providing them with a structure which allows these ideas and needs to be heard. Ideally this structure should be developed together but having several options to work with and explore might be a useful tool to provide a jumping off point.

While for one group, for us to say; ‘You tell us what you need, we trust you’ was powerful, for others it left the scope too open and created a sense of uncertainty. It’s worth remembering that for some groups who are currently furthest away from traditional funding and support structures, power relationships can be difficult to deconstruct – and being aware of what power you have in a relationship is not only useful in terms of adapting your own behaviour, but can also support those honest discussions about what will work well when you are developing an approach together.

Power and Trust

Each of the groups we worked with took a different approach and had differing needs and desires about what felt **comfortable, empowering and right.**

On occasion we found that we were **not the right people to be in the room** for the best decisions to be made, and the most powerful conversations to be had. For some communities, it was important that they could develop the ideas and processes themselves, although we did also learn that guidance and support at the beginning of the process is important to set out expectations from both sides. In future we would do more of this, accepting that the knowledge, and therefore power, we have is useful to share with groups to help guide their thinking in the early days – and that withholding this, even with the best of intentions – in itself creates a power imbalance.

Key for us was to understand the **power dynamic** we were inhabiting and try to ensure we worked with an awareness of that and the imbalance it might bring to a relationship.

We received comments about how people in the groups felt heard for the first time ‘...validated, like finally a funder actually cares, and is listening’.

Systems and internal processes

As we develop new and more informal ways of working with groups and distributing money, we are finding that **new processes and procedures need to be set up internally**.

Community-led grant-making, is **more risk facing than some traditional grant-making** and this can put pressure on internal systems and procedures. For anyone considering approaches that include beneficiaries throughout the process, **internal discussions about what systems might be needed and how this will work beforehand are useful**. Trying to retrofit systems to new ways of working as you go can cause delays and frustrations both internally and externally. Although you might not know exactly what you will need, working on possible options beforehand can save time and energy in the long run.

There are other people out there who have already worked on some of this – so seeking out others who have already been through the process is useful. There is now a well-established global network of practitioners with experience of working in a number of different ways with different groups at [Participatory Grantmakers Community \(participatorygrantmaking.org\)](http://participatorygrantmaking.org).

Looking Ahead

The Equity Programme has been and continues to be a source of inspiration and insight for us. As funders we have met and engaged with groups who have each taught us something new about our approach, our understanding and our shared future.

We continue to have important discussions internally about how we get better at actively reaching groups who might be furthest away from funding – and what support we might need to offer to ensure they can get involved. We know that we need to seek out and start conversations with groups of people and communities we haven't worked with before and that key to that work will be listening deeply to what is needed.

We have learned that approaching community-led grant-making with parameters that are too open can be as much of an issue as grant-making where the parameters are too narrow. Finding the right balance is often a journey in itself – and taking that journey with a group, community or organisation can be empowering and enlightening for everyone – but can also be difficult.

We know that sometimes when things seem difficult or complicated, that is where the best work can be done, and breakthroughs can happen. We are learning about how to work with challenge and see it as an asset, allowing us either to adapt the way we work, or to think through and reconfirm why we work in the way we do.

We continue to learn and are both grateful to the groups we have worked with and thankful for their input and honesty through the process.

About Corra Foundation

Corra Foundation exists to make a difference to the lives of people and communities. It works with others to encourage positive change, opportunity, fairness and growth of aspirations which improve quality of life. Corra wants to see a society in which people create positive change and enjoy fulfilling lives.

In 2020 Corra launched a ten-year strategy. It is long term because making a difference on the big challenges will take time. At its heart is the strong belief that when people find their voice, they unlock the power to make change happen.

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11 February 2022

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