

Funding differently – Neighbourhood Health Grants Reflection session feedback and ideas



Introduction

Funding Differently is a collaboration between Community Southwark, Partnership Southwark, United St Saviour's Charity and the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) in Southwark.

Together, we delivered a grants process that tackles funding challenges raised in Community Southwark's [State of the Sector research](#) and places small charities and community groups at the heart of decision-making.

The VCS designed the process - via the state-of-the-sector research and focus groups in April 2023 and September 2023. VCS groups are also the decision-makers about how funds are distributed.

The grant seeks to reduce health inequalities at a targeted neighbourhood level through strengthening small, local VCS groups.

In November 2024, we brought together groups who have been involved in Funding Differently over the last two years to reflect on how groups had found the process, the impact the funding has had, and what we'd like to do next.

Discussion findings:

- Scoring could be difficult, but groups learnt how to do it and benefitted from the process.
- Scoring was good as it meant that those making decisions understood community needs and the services that can support these.
- Some groups need more support with scoring. It can also be difficult if someone is scoring whose first language is not English. In the last round, more support was offered and taken up.
- Some felt their application had been scored unfairly i.e. assuming they were from a large organisation. It is important that groups base information on the application and don't make assumptions as well as being aware of their biases.
- There is a balance between restrictive scoring and it being too flexible. There was a discussion of whether a scoring matrix might help, but concerns that this could make it overcomplicated and lost the benefits of people with local understanding and lived experience doing the scoring.
- There could be different types of funding pots covering different types of needs/topics (e.g. Cost of Living, mental health, young people, etc.)
- Further support for long-term funding/building sustainability. What happens next? How can successful and unsuccessful groups be supported?
- The evolution of funding differently is important, we shouldn't be complacent. Consider accessibility for all groups from those at the start of their journey to more established groups.

Suggested actions:

- Continue with information sheet – check for clarity/simplicity and whether further information would be useful: [Top Tip FD 2024 £5k](#)
- Offer an online information session on scoring, prior to assessing grants, to cover the following:
 - Tips for reviewing applications and scoring.
 - How to avoid bias
 - Information on what Community Southwark does (due diligence, checking scoring) to reassure groups that the process is fair.
 - Make it clear that groups can access individual support if required.
 - Q and A
- Continue to signpost to other Community Southwark support services. Our training plan for 2025-26 will directly support groups who have been part of Funding Differently.
- We will continue to link this work with our wider State of the Sector work around funding, ensuring that we take every opportunity to work in partnership with the VCS and funders.

2. Impact

Questions

The monitoring process:

Referring to the monitoring questions on your tables and the information we have shared:

- Is this a good way to measure the impact of funding differently (impact on organisation and service users) – why/why not? Is there anything you would like to add?

The impact of the grant and how would groups be more impactful:

- For groups who received a grant - What activities (project delivery) worked best/were the most impactful?
- For all groups - If there were no barriers, what would you do to be more impactful? (the dream/vision)

Discussion findings:

The monitoring process:

- Groups were positive about the monitoring process, but some felt it was important to acknowledge that a visit might be intimidating for some.
- Participants felt visits/phone calls were good.
- Case studies capture impact well.
- Groups would benefit from reassurance that it is not a test or check but a way of having a conversation so that Community Southwark can take the most important information and add it to monitoring reports.
- Groups could be sent the questions before the phone call/visit.

Suggested actions:

- Community Southwark to ensure that it is communicated effectively about the purpose of the monitoring visit/phone call and to reassure groups. Consider sending questions in advance.

Impact:

Most impactful activities

focus groups
day trips
exercise & healthy food
eating together
wellbeing activities for women
speech and language therapy
dance and fitness sessions
cooking sessions
group discussions
body fit

Impact on organisations

Reaching more people
Expanding to support families
Increasing awareness and reach
Hiring more staff
Improving accessibility - Increased service and reduced fees
More activity
Free up capacity to deliver services
Improving governance

The dream

What groups would do if there were no barriers:

Increase capacity
More partnerships
Available longer hours
Opportunity to celebrate
A comfortable multi-use space
Assistance from professionals - finance, HR, communications
Really do what we want - meet demand Tech expertise
Recruit a fundraiser
A community centre
More activity tailored to individuals' needs
Offer more

3. Future

ALL GROUPS AGREED: LONG TERM IMPACT REQUIRES LONG-TERM FUNDING

Questions

- If funds are available from Partnership Southwark, do we want to continue with Funding Differently?
- Should we ask other funders to put money into the Funding Differently process?

Discussion findings:

- All groups agreed that Funding Differently should continue.
- All groups agreed that we should ask other funders to put money into the Funding Differently process.
- Groups highlighted the need for sustainability so that their work is impactful longer-term and acknowledged that it is difficult to show impact with a one-off grant.
- Groups also acknowledged the benefits the process brings. It can help groups collaborate and avoid replication.
- One organisation acknowledged a larger pot is a great way to overcome barriers for a newly established organisation.
- One idea was to tailor Funding Differently to specific funders based on topic.
- Encouraging other funders to be part of it will also help with funder-VCS relationships.
- All agreed the principles of funding differently should stay the same.
- There should be a push to replicate the model across London

Suggested actions:

- Continue with Funding Differently if funds are available through Partnership Southwark. Community Southwark to meet with Partnership Southwark in the new year.
- Community Southwark to approach other funders to contribute to Funding Differently, with a focus on whether we can secure multi-year funding and target different areas/themes.
- Partnership, networking, collaboration - Consider a celebration and other ways of collaborating.

Community Southwark would like to thank everyone who attended the reflection session for sharing their experiences, contributing to the discussions thoughtfully and honestly and playing a direct role in shaping decisions about Funding Differently.



Appendix One: Post-session feedback

What worked well?

- Reflection as a group was productive.
- It was good to share our experience and hear about other people's challenges and successes.
- Explaining things to the grassroots, and making participants feel they were being listened to.
- Small group discussions worked well.
- The VCS knowledge in the room and being able to share the different experiences groups had
- Going through the summary of previous application examples and hearing various interesting outcomes are encouraging.
- Great opportunity to listen to the needs of community groups.

What could be better?

- More time.
- Better table layout.
- More intermingling/networking.
- Greater clarity over the questions.
- Maybe for next time a way wherein different selected charities can share thoughts with other participants on where they can collaborate or become more effective.
- Chance for groups who were not successful to reflect on the impact of being unsuccessful.

Is there anything else you think Community Southwark should be doing to effect change for the Voluntary and Community Sector in Southwark?

- Working more with other funders in partnership for capacity-building funding opportunities.
- Supporting progression for community groups. Since we have started receiving funding we need to maintain and grow our projects and the support is much needed to progress to the next stages.
- Drop-ins for organisations based on themes... I.e. all food equity organisations 1 month. All sports and leisure another. All mental health another. To make networking and collaboration more specific.
- I think developing, working on, and promoting more programmes like this to the funding sector and others that have power over programming and purse strings. Co-creating is an important shift in the development space and it would be great to see real, transformational change in the VCS at the structural and institutional levels.
- I'm really interested in the network sharing learning with each other so we can all learn from one another. Knowing there are lots of EOSL groups it would be great to be able to talk through what those who were successful did and also the practicalities of that like managing time.

Comments on Funding Differently

- Such an amazing community, showing great work to make a positive impact and great contributions to the wellbeing of the people we support is very fulfilling. It was such a lovely day of networking as well.
- I feel the process has a high level of transparency. It's a learning to be adopted.
- Guidance on monitoring and evaluation is definitely needed. Help with applications for £25k and more is needed for community groups that are growing and expanding capacity.
- As part of the process, those who were not successful at the 1st stage could also be asked for feedback (at present this is limited to application stage and after 2nd stage.)
- You are doing well. You make things easy. The fact that the grant is unrestricted, and charities do not have to come up with different projects each time makes life a lot easier. Thank you!

- Let us continue to work together to improve the mental health and well-being of the communities that we serve. You are such a gem and a blessing to us all.
- Allow micro charities with good track records of existence and involvement in the community to access large grants. Payments could be in instalments/stages with reports or other monitoring steps. This will help us focus on our callings and have our minds put at rest, not having to worry about where the next set of funds will come from to keep our services running. This, too, will help our mental health.
- Keep working on accessibility – what do groups that are unsuccessful need? Consider dis/ability, as well as language, reading/writing literacy, cultural literacy, organisational capacity, technological skills, computer literacy, marketing/PR skills – to name a few.
- It's a very good process (one of a kind) we have learnt. We will adopt it in our practices/work too.

Comments on Community Southwark

- Community Southwark does so much to support and grow the organisations in the borough's VCS.... keep doing what you are doing!
- I want to use this opportunity to thank the Community Southwark Team for their input over the past few years in supporting the Voluntary and Community Sector in Southwark.
- Thank you so much for the great work that you do in bringing us all together. We are grateful we like to take this opportunity to thank you for the work you are doing, to help organisations like us to improve our mental health and well-being.
- The work you are doing is great.