

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE:

Uncovered

Vital Voices

**The importance of building relationships
between small charities and grant-makers**

In partnership with the National Lottery



Introduction

Heart of Bucks' 'Vital Voices' events are community forums that give a platform to small, grassroots organisations in Bucks and help them connect with influential people on key issues, to enact change and make a difference.

This event 'The importance of building relationships between small charities and grant-makers', focused on informing national funders of the challenges and barriers incurred by local charities and how we can work together to overcome these.

The wider discussions focused on grant-making practices generally, by a range of different funders, both local and national. The group acknowledged the wide variety of approaches taken by different grant-making institutions.

We welcomed Hannah Rignell, Deputy Director for Policy and Partnerships (England) at the National Lottery Community Fund, and her colleagues as our guests to join the conversation and listen to concerns from the local charities and community groups in attendance.

Heart of Bucks were joined by representatives from local groups who shared their experiences to inform the National Lottery's team:

Caudwell Youth	One Can Trust	Youth Concern
Chiltern Rangers	One-Eighty	Youth Enquiry Service
DrugFAM	The Theatre Shed	Young Creative Bucks

We were kindly hosted by the team at Buckinghamshire New University, at their Community Wellbeing Hub in Aylesbury.



Key Insights

Funding Pressures

The group voiced concerns regarding the general model of grant funding, particularly emphasising the need for longer-term and multi-year funding opportunities. Such arrangements would offer greater security and stability for local charities, reducing the administrative burden associated with frequent grant applications. The National Lottery Community Fund model was praised by some participants for providing substantial multi-year grants which gave significant security and allowed for greater future planning.

Additionally, participants highlighted challenges in securing funding for provisions normally provided by schools. While acknowledging the reluctance or inability for grant-makers to fund statutory services, it was noted that cuts to school funding have increasingly placed pressure on Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations to fill the gaps in services traditionally (or perhaps more appropriately) provided at schools.

Moreover, there was a call for some funders to shift their focus beyond project-specific outcomes, allowing for more investment in core operations and infrastructure. This reflects a broader demand for open provision and funding mechanisms. However, it was recognised that changing the funding landscape requires collaborative efforts between local and national funders, as well as a collective effort to challenge any aversions to providing grants for 'core costs' and overheads. This more sustainable approach would reflect a grant funding system that supports the diverse needs of our community.



Photo: Alison Ashbolt



Grant Processes

Participants emphasised the need for improvement in grant application processes and grant monitoring, recognising that both local and national funders often need to streamline these procedures. It was noted that many systems currently employed by some grant-makers often discourage applications for smaller grants, as they entail the same level of reporting and processing as larger, more sustainable grants.

Suggestions for improvement included increasing the pace of decision-making and exploring opportunities to expedite the approval process for smaller grants. This would enhance the efficiency of project implementation and enable organisations to deliver impactful initiatives more swiftly.

Overall, there was a consensus that funders should have a collective responsibility to streamline application and reporting procedures to minimise duplication of work and enhance the efficiency of support provided to the VCSE sector. By simplifying these processes, we can empower organisations to focus more on their core business: delivering positive outcomes for our Buckinghamshire communities.

Buckinghamshire Challenges

The perception of Buckinghamshire as a wealthy county, with no deprivation or social challenges, can sometimes exclude local charities from accessing national funding opportunities. However, the creation of the Local Authority's *Opportunity Bucks* programme has been critical, providing a platform and justification for local charities to access national funding streams. Despite the prevalent image of local affluence, discussions at the forum underscored the significance and necessity of place-based funding initiatives.

By highlighting the specific needs and challenges in some areas within Buckinghamshire, *Opportunity Bucks* has effectively demonstrated the value of directing funding towards localised solutions. This approach not only acknowledges the diversity of needs within the county but also ensures that resources are allocated where they are most needed.

The conversations surrounding place-based funding have shed light on the potential benefits it could bring to a county like Buckinghamshire. By embracing this approach, we can work towards addressing local disparities and enable a more inclusive and resilient community for all residents, regardless of their postcode.



Photo: Emanuel Moldovan



Knowledge and Understanding

During the discussions, there was a mutual recognition of the importance of sharing best practices across the VCSE sector in Buckinghamshire. This collaborative approach not only fosters a stronger sense of community but also frees up valuable time and resources that can be redirected to areas where they are most needed.

One of the challenges identified revolved around national funders and their understanding of how best to support grant holders at a local level. It was emphasised that national funders should try to gain as deep an understanding as possible of the specific needs of local organisations and charities to provide effective support. This could involve tailoring funding opportunities to match local needs or offering additional support services to grant holders if requested, such as capacity building, application training, and skills development in a range of governance activities.

By encouraging greater collaboration and understanding between national funders and local grassroots organisations, funding resources are more likely to be allocated in a way that maximises impact and supports diverse and complex community needs. This collaborative approach will ultimately lead to stronger, more resilient organisations that are better equipped to address the challenges facing Buckinghamshire.

The Value of the VCSE Sector

Despite the invaluable contributions made by the VCSE sector in Buckinghamshire, there was a feeling that charitable organisations are often undervalued. Participants collectively expressed the need for greater recognition and appreciation of the vital role played by the VCSE sector in our community. Staff are quite often paid much less than in other sectors and with increasing pressures on household finances, there are recruitment and retention challenges.

One area of concern highlighted was the pressure placed on local charities to participate in 'corporate volunteering days.' While these events are appreciated, they often require significant resources and capacity to organise, without additional funding allocated specifically for this purpose.

By placing more value on the VCSE sector, there is potential to alleviate some of this burden and create more capacity for organisations to engage in such activities and connect through volunteering. Recognising the important contributions of charities not only helps to dispel negative stereotypes, but also empowers organisations to better serve the needs of our community.

It is important to collectively value and recognise the huge impact made by the VCSE sector and to ensure the sector has the financial resources it needs to continue making a difference.



Photo: Buckingham Canal Society



Photo: Phil Richards

Public Sector Gap

Ongoing cuts to public sector budgets have created significant challenges for local charities and the people they support. These cuts have resulted in a noticeable gap in service provision locally, which is increasingly being filled by VCSE organisations.

Despite stepping up to address these pressing needs, VCSE organisations are often doing so without additional funding to support their efforts, due to financial constraints and budget cuts. This situation underscores the importance of recognising the vital role played by these organisations in providing essential services and support to those most vulnerable in our community.

As further cuts and reductions in public spending are anticipated, there is an increasing need for non-profit funders to continue (and grow) their support for the work of VCSE organisations. By providing additional funding and resources, funders can help bridge the gap caused by stretched public sector services and ensure that essential support continues to be provided to those in need. This proactive approach will be crucial in safeguarding the well-being of communities and ensuring that nobody falls through the cracks during these challenging times.

Voices of the Community



Paul Rompani
CEO
DrugFam

“Attending the Heart of Bucks Community forum was a fantastic opportunity to meet some of the remarkable people leading local charities supporting those in need in Buckinghamshire. We discussed the challenges we’re facing and shared ideas about innovative ways to raise awareness, funds and support for our respective causes. It was also great to get some insight into the work of the National Lottery Community Fund and to inform their review of their portfolio. Thank you, Heart of Bucks, for an enjoyable, informative and constructive afternoon!”

Voices of the Community



Claire Willis
Programme Manager
Young Creative Bucks

“It was great to have been invited to participate in the ‘Vital Voices’ community forum event hosted by Heart of Bucks. It was a fantastic way to learn more about a national funder - The National Lottery Community Fund - to find out how important it is to them to engage with charities. It was positive to discuss how they can support us best, but it was also a great opportunity to connect and build relationships with other like-minded organisations and community groups.”

Voices of the Community



Karen Ironside
Partnerships Director
Caudwell Youth

“Heart of Bucks once again brought together a range of charities to consider the key challenges and opportunities facing the not-for-profit sector in Buckinghamshire. It felt like a powerful statement as to our shared experience. The National Lottery Community Fund’s presence felt like a powerful opportunity for those on the coalface to impact the largest funder in the UK.”

The National Lottery | Community Fund



**Hannah Rignell,
Deputy Director
for Policy and
Partnerships
The National Lottery**

“As the largest community funder in the UK, it’s vital that we at the National Lottery Community Fund continue to listen to communities. At ‘Vital Voices’, I was pleased to hear positive feedback about how National Lottery funding is already supporting important community projects in Buckinghamshire like drug rehabilitation and local youth centres.

I also came away with some great ideas about how we could go further, investing most in places, people and communities experiencing poverty, disadvantage and discrimination. Thank you to all the charities who came along and shared their thoughts – you have informed our efforts to distribute at least £4 billion of National Lottery funding by 2030.”

Food for thought



How can funders facilitate peer-to-peer support across the VCSE sector and could this be driven locally?



What are the advantages to place-based funding and how can local funders adopt this approach?



How can national funders best support current and future grant holders in capacity building, alongside project funding?



How can funders adequately assess the need for both reactive and preventative funding?



What does good partnership and collaboration look like between grant-makers and beneficiary groups?

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Thank you to all the charities and groups that took part in our Vital Voices community forum:

Caudwell Youth

Chiltern Rangers

DrugFAM

One Can Trust

One-Eighty

The Theatre Shed

Youth Concern

Youth Enquiry Service

Young Creative Bucks

Buckinghamshire: Uncovered - Vital Voices

Helping grassroot charities be heard

Registered charity no. 1073861
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