

Making a difference



Authorship

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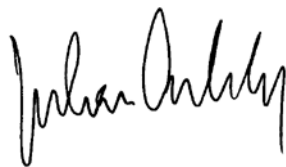
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Foreword

Welcome to *Making a difference*, celebrating ten years of the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR). Here, we present ten projects in the words of those we have worked with to illustrate the diversity of our work and the difference that IVAR makes. We hope this report will be of particular interest to funders and voluntary and community organisations.

Since 2001, we have carried out almost 100 research projects. While the range of research topics has been wide (from asset ownership to mergers; from bridge-building to impact), some things have remained constant. First, our belief that practitioners themselves hold the answers: our job is to facilitate and guide them towards solutions – research should always be the servant, not the master of a problem. Second, our commitment to locating and understanding problems in the context of earlier research and public policy. Third, our desire to encourage funders and policymakers to engage with the voluntary and community sector in a way that is attuned to their needs and potential, and that does not seek to interfere or co-opt. Finally, always to encourage practitioners to ask, listen, reflect and adapt.

This report offers a window into the process of our work and the difference it can make in the words of those we have worked with. The experiences set out here are, in part, testament to the work of our multi-talented team of staff, associates, academic adviser and trustees. Much of it has been made possible by the unstinting support of the three charitable trusts – Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the LankellyChase Foundation and the Tudor Trust – that have provided us with partnership funding. All of it has been made interesting and worthwhile by the willingness of hundreds of people across the UK – users, volunteers, staff and trustees of voluntary organisations; public sector officers and elected officials; the staff and trustees of trusts and foundations – to engage in collaborative problem-solving. We thank them all and our many friends and supporters who have made our first ten years fruitful and fun.



Julian Ashby, Chair



Ben Cairns, Director

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Institute for Voluntary Action Research

Collaborative, practical,
problem-solving ...

Using action research to
understand and strengthen
voluntary and community
sector organisation and
management.

We believe that voluntary and community organisations have distinctive characteristics that require special attention and that organisations benefit most from research that recognises these differences.

The Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) is an independent, charitable research institute, based at Birkbeck, University of London. IVAR's mission is contained in our name. Our main interest is **voluntary action** – activities, services, community development or campaigns that aim to improve the quality of life of disadvantaged individuals, groups and communities. Our main focus is using **action research** to understand and strengthen voluntary and community sector organisation and management.

We work collaboratively; we concentrate on problem-solving; and we want our work to be relevant and practically useful to the voluntary and community sector, as well as funders, policymakers and other sectors.

Related publications

- Cairns, B. (2009) 'The independence of the voluntary sector from government in England' in Smerdon, M. (ed) *The First Principle of Voluntary Action*, The Baring Foundation: London
- Cairns, B., Harris, M. and Carroll, M. (2006) 'Action research: Professional researchers in the community' in Cnaan, R. and Milofsky, C. (eds) *Handbook on Community Movements and Local Organizations*, Kluwer/Plenum: New York

Available at www.ivar.org.uk

Who we are

Our research approach – collaborative, practical, problem-solving – is made possible by our team of staff, associates and trustees, all of whom have worked in and around the voluntary and community sector as volunteers, paid staff, leaders, trustees, teachers and researchers. Our team understands and cares about the distinctiveness and independence of voluntary and community sector organisations.

What we do

Our work starts in different ways: a funder calls us to ask for help with a problem; we develop a project in response to needs we are told about by community organisations; we submit tenders and we receive commissions. We operate at a national, regional and local level; our work is funded by trusts and foundations, public bodies, national infrastructure bodies and local organisations.

Throughout our work – literature reviews, interviews, focus groups, workshops, training – three things never change about what we offer:

- 1 Our work begins with a practical problem or challenge;** this becomes our 'research question'. As part of trying to answer that question, we draw on earlier work – our own and others' concepts and theories – that can shed light and provide pointers to solutions.
- 2 We act as a critical friend,** providing space for reflection and debate to help people find their own responses to the challenges they face. This process helps to produce outcomes that are owned and understood by the people we work with. It also makes organisational change meaningful and durable.
- 3 By producing practical responses to challenges of organisation and management, our work provides lessons and evidence** to change practice, inform policy, develop theory and promote wider understanding of the voluntary and community sector.

Our current interests

Voluntary and community organisations need support that is not only sensitive and thoughtful, but is also relevant and useful. That means us engaging in topics that really matter; they currently include: impact; mergers; public services reform and cross-sector relationships; capability building; and work with trusts and foundations.

To find out more, call 020 7380 3008 or email enquiries@ivar.org.uk

Examples of our work

In the words of those we have worked with



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People felt they had a voice in shaping our future strategy ... the ideas came from them.

Taking stock and implementing change

Breast Cancer Care strategic review

Breast Cancer Care is a UK charity that aims to provide the best treatment, information and support to those affected by breast cancer. The organisation employs approximately 220 staff and manages over 600 volunteers. In 2001, IVAR completed a strategic review with Breast Cancer Care following the arrival of a new Chief Executive. Diana Jupp, Director of Services, reflects on the organisation's experience and the long-term legacy of having worked with IVAR.

It was the first time that we'd done a strategic review of that scale. At the time, a new Chief Executive had been appointed and she commissioned IVAR to work with us. We were in a healthy financial position, but our three-year goals were just coming to an end so it made sense to take stock and look at progress and future direction.

IVAR facilitated focus groups and individual meetings with our senior management team, all other staff, trustees and some volunteers. The way that IVAR worked with us was very inclusive, consultative and open. It meant that people felt they had a voice in shaping our future strategy and everyone was 'on-side' when it came to implementing the changes; the ideas came from them.

Two major changes took place within our organisation as a result of the strategic review. Firstly, we set up a Policy and Research Unit in order to increase the voice and influence aspect of our work. This led to a new Director's post being created and the team has continued to grow since then. Alongside this, we created a user involvement programme to increase our ability to represent our members' needs. The second big change was IVAR's recommendation for us to be 'regionalised'; we now have three regional offices in Glasgow, Sheffield and Cardiff.

Our Policy and Research Unit is still flourishing today and has definitely had an impact on our organisational profile. It has enabled us to become an 'evidence-based' organisation, evaluating all our services in order to secure funding and to ensure we continue to provide high quality services for our beneficiaries. Having a regional presence has given us opportunities to provide more face-to-face services. I admit we didn't implement this recommendation immediately because we weren't quite ready for the scale of change at that time, but we have continued to move this way ever since. In fact, ten years on I still have new members of staff quoting bits of the IVAR report to me, in particular the '50 mile radius' - the idea that the office could serve people who were an hour's drive away.

In hindsight, it would have been good if IVAR could have provided more ongoing support in the implementation phase. There had been a lot of interaction and connection between IVAR and our staff, but this ended rapidly once the review had been completed. However, we were left in a position to take things forward and we knew where we were heading. IVAR's work has a lasting legacy within our organisation

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The question of governance has never gone away but IVAR's research gave us a framework for debates.

Building relationships to improve governance

Skillshare International governance review

Skillshare International is a UK-based international development charity, working in Africa and Asia. It focuses on 'people-to-people' development – the exchange of ideas, experience and skills, with a strong commitment to local priorities and working with local partners. In 2002, IVAR worked with Skillshare International on a review of governance structures. Cliff Allum, CEO, looks back on his experience of working with IVAR, and the impact of that review.

When I came into post, 18 years ago, my brief was to localise the activities of Skillshare International in the countries that we were working in. This was part of our ethos of working to the vision of our partners and involved setting up country-based Programme Advisory Committees. My remit was to extend these committees into local governance structures. Our UK trustees saw this as a value-driven issue but there was limited enthusiasm on the Programme Advisory Committees and progress stalled. A few years later we decided to come back and look again at what kind of governance structures would work best. That's when we put the piece of research out to tender, and IVAR was successful.

We were attracted to IVAR by their core expertise on governance (to frame and underpin the research) and their decision to bring in a respected external consultant with international development experience to carry out the review. We valued the combination of these perspectives and it felt like a fresh approach. The consultant's experience opened us up to looking at the ways that other organisations worked, which was really important.

The research findings fundamentally challenged our existing approach. We came to the review with an organisational predisposition to localise, and a commitment to having local structures run by local

people. The research indicated that while structures are indeed important, we needed to spend far more energy in building links and relationships. This realisation added a very different dimension to looking at governance, and ultimately prompted us to hold a conference of the Programme Advisory Committees, which resulted in nominations onto the International Board.

Since the review, IVAR have remained in touch. I have attended seminars, and maintained a good relationship with IVAR, which means we can continue to draw on their expertise. Looking back, the process was very useful, the research is still relevant, and IVAR did a good job. The question of governance has never gone away, but IVAR's research gave us a framework for debates, for on-going discussions between me and senior managers in other countries, and for the relationship with trustees. Improving governance is always in our minds, along with the key message from the research – build relationships not just structures.

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Skillshare
International



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IVAR understood the delicacy of issues such as the name, branding, who would be CEO and who would be Chair.

To merge or not to merge?

The Adolescent and Children's Trust merger support

The Adolescent and Children's Trust (TACT) is the UK's largest charity and voluntary agency providing fostering and adoption services in England, Scotland and Wales. Its core work involves providing high quality and well supported fostering or adoptive families for children and young people in the care of local authorities. In 2003, TACT received merger support from IVAR. Kevin Williams, TACT's CEO, describes the experience of working with IVAR.

We first came across IVAR's distinctive approach when we attended a workshop on mergers that they ran at Aston Business School. We liked their insights and methodology for merger discussions so it was natural to turn to them when we first got into serious talks with two prospective merger partners in 2003. Each set of discussions was unique and kept separate.

Received wisdom at the time was to focus on detailed due diligence and face the difficult issues only if the numbers suggested the merger was beneficial. But we preferred IVAR's approach – which was to explore all the prospective deal-breakers up front. IVAR were independent and understood the delicacy of issues such as the name, branding, who would be CEO and who would be Chair. With their support and with open engagement from all parties we were able to work through these difficult areas and reach a satisfactory conclusion.

Since then, we have come back to IVAR for merger support on four further occasions. Although each set of circumstances has been different, IVAR's method of engagement has been similar. In all cases we have got to know the prospective partners much better as a result of tackling the core issues up front. You get to know the heart of the organisation and not just

the numbers. Crucial to the process has been the support, independence and empathy of IVAR staff.

In two of these further cases the prospective mergers went ahead and in two they did not. Where the mergers didn't go through, it was by mutual agreement reached in the early stages of the process and without the cost and time investment of embarking on detailed due diligence.

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Related publications

- IVAR (2011) *Thinking about ... merger*, IVAR: London
- Moran, R., Hutchison, R. and Cairns, B. (2009) "Assuming the spirit of the whole": Small and large organisations engaged in merger, paper presented to the *Annual Meeting of ARNOVA*, Cleveland, November 2009

Developing partnerships and cross-sector understanding

St Helens and the Partnership Improvement Programme

In 2005, St Helens local authority in Merseyside, North West England, took part in the Partnership Improvement Programme (PIP), developed and run by IVAR and IDeA¹. The programme was designed to improve cross-sector working between local authorities and the voluntary sector. Peter Hughes at St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council (MBC), and Sally Yeoman at Halton & St Helens Voluntary and Community Action (VCA)², share their experiences of working with IVAR.

Peter Hughes, Head of Policy and Performance at St Helens MBC

St Helens MBC has always had good relations with the third sector so we were really interested in developing this through PIP. In particular, we hoped it might give us all a greater understanding of the value the third sector has in contributing to council priorities.

We worked as a cross-sector group over six sessions. Though we had worked for many years with the third sector, this was the first time we've worked in such a detailed and constructive way. For me, the composition of the group was a crucial aspect in making it work; IVAR brought together the right people to make decisions. All of us were committed to working together and had the power to take things forward – and that's what we did!

As a group, we trusted IVAR because they were independent – they weren't biased towards the third sector or the local authority. They encouraged full and frank discussions, challenged our thinking and really kept us on track. Without IVAR's support, I'm not sure how much progress we would have made. By the end of the PIP process, we had created a joint action plan that was both realistic and clear about what we could do together.

Part of IVAR's approach was to recognise what was already working well – this was so helpful as it meant we didn't have to start from the very beginning. Of course, there were some fears for the third sector – at the end of the day we (the council) are seen as the paymasters – but IVAR set up a safe, confidential space for us to work together.

Taking part in this programme helped us to look at the way the whole council works with the third sector and to understand the valuable contributions that voluntary organisations make. We appreciate the challenges these organisations are facing and they understand our expectations for working together. IVAR's knowledge of the national landscape was helpful here because they understood our expectations and the legal requirements of government grant programmes.

Since PIP, the third sector has developed a quality standard, which will help when bidding to deliver council contracts. We've also jointly developed a directory of third sector organisations outlining what each does and how they help to meet agreed local priorities. It's also an opportunity to 'showcase' their work to potential funders, grant makers and commissioners. The directory also benefits the general public; with the personalisation of adult social care, clients can use the directory to find out about the services that they may wish to 'purchase'. With IVAR's support, the third sector is developing itself further and along the way has the potential to help individuals to help themselves – this is what we really wanted.

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¹ In 2011, IDeA (the Improvement and Development Agency) became Local Government Improvement and Development.

² In 2010, St Helens Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) merged with Halton Voluntary Action to become Halton & St Helens Voluntary and Community Action (VCA). At the time of participating in the Partnership Improvement Programme the organisation was St Helens CVS.



St.Helens



It wasn't 'off the shelf' but really tailored to the way we all wanted to work.

Sally Yeoman, CEO of Halton & St Helens VCA

St Helens has enjoyed a tradition of partnership working between the voluntary and community sector and the local authority and we were pleased to get an opportunity to build on this. IVAR worked with us to set up a cross-sector working group for PIP; they listened to our views on who should take part in the sessions and knew who to bring to the table. Having the right group of people, including the Chief Executive of the council, has been really important to the success of the work; the council took the programme seriously and genuinely engaged in dialogue with us.

IVAR enabled open, frank discussions and gave us room to debate key issues. This included looking at what was going well with cross-sector working in St Helens and thinking about areas where we might develop joint work. PIP gave us all a chance to outline our expectations at the beginning and work together with these understood and heard.

Changes in the financial climate seemed to bite right at the end of the process. One could argue that participating in PIP stood us in good stead for tackling the financial challenges together. The local authority entered into conversations with voluntary groups about the financial challenges they face; they carried out impact assessments to understand the consequences of changes to funding and have worked closely with the sector. This open dialogue has really allowed relationships to develop.

I didn't realise that taking part in PIP would enable us to do as much as it has – we established a joint action plan that the CEO of the local authority gave her commitment to and which was signed-off by the Local Strategic Partnership. This high level of endorsement is one of the most significant things about the PIP process.

The council's procurement strategy now includes 'Be Local, Buy Local' with a section focused on the voluntary sector, helping to ensure that organisations aren't cut off from delivering services by procurement processes. This is a significant achievement – now,

better quality services are getting to local people because smaller voluntary organisations, who can deliver services to fit local need, are able to participate.

We felt lucky to work with IVAR; they had the skills and experience to make the process meaningful for us – it wasn't 'off the shelf' but really tailored to the way we all wanted to work: it worked in a 'St Helens way'! We've kept in touch with IVAR since PIP ended – they are always genuinely interested to hear how we are getting on.

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Halton & St Helens
Voluntary and Community Action

Related publications

- Cairns, B. and Harris, M.E. (2011) 'Local cross-sector partnerships: Tackling the challenges collaboratively', *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, 21 (3), 311-324
- IVAR (2010) *Joint approaches to joint challenges: Evaluation of the Partnership Improvement Programme 2010*, IVAR: London
- IVAR (2009) *Getting things done together: key findings from the Partnership Improvement Programme*, IDeA: London
- IVAR (2006) *Making it real: A report of the pilot partnership improvement programme with voluntary and community organisations and local authorities*, IDeA: London



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The research gave us the confidence to speak with authority to government.

Servants of the community or agents of government?

bassac study examining the voice and advocacy role of community organisations

The British Association of Settlements and Social Action Centres (bassac), now Locality³, was a membership body for community-based multi-purpose organisations. In 2006, bassac commissioned IVAR to undertake research exploring the role of community-based organisations and their contribution to public services delivery and civil renewal. Ben Hughes, Chief Executive of bassac at the time of the study, discusses his experience of working with IVAR.

The idea for the research emerged from the views of member organisations and the bassac board that, whilst funding from the state was relatively strong, there was a perception that quality might be being compromised and that local work was being eroded by focusing on public service delivery. I felt that there ought to be an evidence base for what was happening so we commissioned IVAR.

IVAR worked closely with us at every stage of the process: we discussed ongoing progress as well as the emerging themes. It was very collegiate which we found beneficial. IVAR's process really enhanced the value of the research as well as the eventual report. They worked with a sample of our members and there was a feeling that their approach was complementary to the values of our members.

bassac launched the research at a national conference, which helped generate press interest in the research findings and push some of the key issues – it shone a spotlight on government manipulation of the sector. The research gave us the confidence to speak with authority to government and to contradict some of the assumed wisdom of what they were saying.

This work had a positive impact on our relationships with our members – they felt that their concerns had been understood and put forward. As a result, bassac undertook a new policy path, leading to further research on the voice and advocacy role of member organisations: it became a number one priority.

The process encouraged me to feel confident in commissioning research in this way and support the findings, even those critical of members. The research also helped build relationships with IVAR that were lasting and mutually beneficial. It was a very positive experience and we continued to work with IVAR, as a partner and a research body while I was in post at bassac.

Locality, 33 Corsham Street, London N1 6DR

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www.locality.org.uk



Related publications

- Cairns, B. and Hutchison, R. (2010) 'Community anchor organisations: Sustainability and independence' in Billis, D. (ed) *Hybrid Organizations and the Third Sector*, Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke
- Cairns, B., Hutchison, R. and Aiken, M. (2010) "'It's not what we do, it's how we do it': managing the tension between service delivery and advocacy", *Voluntary Sector Review*, 1 (2), 193-207
- IVAR (2006) *Servants of the community or agents of government? The role of community-based organisations and their contribution to public services delivery and civil renewal*, bassac: London

³ In April 2011, bassac and the Development Trusts Association (DTA) merged to form Locality.



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IVAR gave us an independent perspective and brought live data to the table so that we could debate key issues.

Learning to work together

Community Alliance Real Time Evaluation

The Community Alliance is a national partnership consisting of Locality⁴ and Community Matters. It provides support to organisations across England with the aim of developing and promoting community anchors. Community anchors are independent, community run and led organisations that are rooted in a sense of place and have a mission to improve things for the whole community. In 2007, IVAR was commissioned to carry out a Real Time Evaluation of the Community Alliance. Steve Wyler, Chief Executive of Locality, reflects on the experience of working with IVAR.

I had some experience of Real Time Evaluation (RTE) and had found it a really useful methodology; the partnership thought that it would also be useful for the Community Alliance. We were aware that, as with all partnerships, there were going to be some challenges along the way; each of the partner organisations, in their own right, was ambitious, competing for funding and trying to establish their credibility and influence. Competition within a partnership is normal and natural, but we could see that, if not managed correctly, it could lead to the partnership suffering.

Working with IVAR on the RTE didn't overcome these competitive tendencies but it enabled us to see them more clearly and to manage them when tensions were building. Having IVAR involved also gave us an independent perspective and brought live data to the table so that we could debate key issues, such as how best to resource the Community Alliance.

IVAR were always even-handed when representing the views of each organisation, even though the organisations were of different size and strength.

They placed a strong and consistent emphasis on the need for us to be clear about our partnership's purpose and vision; being constantly reminded of this was very beneficial and it helped us to clarify and articulate our core aims. IVAR were very good at seeking stakeholder feedback and ensuring that this was represented in the evaluation. They spoke with the senior management within the three organisations as well as some Community Alliance members. I thought this was correct and helpful.

To some extent, the Community Alliance has enabled the partner organisations to consolidate and improve their 'offer' of resources and technical support to members, which has helped to build local organisational capacity.

Recently, the IVAR RTE provided a foundation for initial discussions about the possibility of bassac and the DTA merging. We decided to work with IVAR again and commissioned them separately to facilitate the merger. Locality has since been born and is still working with Community Matters as part of the Community Alliance.

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Related publications

— IVAR (2011) *Thinking about ... collaboration*, IVAR: London

⁴ In April 2011, bassac and the Development Trusts Association (DTA) merged to form Locality.

Stepping back from the day-to-day

Depression Alliance and Bell View take part in the Tudor Trust Support Project⁵

Depression Alliance is an independent charity providing non-medical support to people with depression. The charity provides information and support via publications, support services and a network of self-help groups. In 2008, IVAR worked with Depression Alliance to provide strategic support to the Chief Executive and Chair. Emer O'Neill, Chief Executive of Depression Alliance, talks about the organisation's experience of working with IVAR.

When I became the CEO five years ago, Depression Alliance had been having some difficulties: key staff had left and some long-term funding had come to an end. The organisation had been without a CEO for a year and there were some big decisions to be made about the future of the organisation – should we look into the idea of merger? How could we expand our membership or should we think about closing down?

Following a grant application to the Tudor Trust it was suggested that IVAR could work with us to conduct a strategic review. Tudor felt that the Depression Alliance had many strengths, including a tried and tested model of supporting people with depression, so they wanted to help us build on these. IVAR worked with us over four months to help us review the role of the CEO and the board of trustees, in order to help us develop a three year strategic plan.

It was very clear to me that IVAR were there to support us and bring us into a stronger position.

They were able to help us stand back from the day-to-day and think about how we could build on the core strengths of the organisation including: the commitment, loyalty and abilities of the Chair and trustees; how to maintain the organisation's way of working; and how we might maintain and grow our membership. The Chair and I had independent meetings with IVAR and a meeting was facilitated with the board.

The report and strategic plan that IVAR helped us to produce included the introduction of a new post – Membership Services Coordinator. We were able to develop a focused and targeted job description and, as a result, we were awarded core funding from Tudor for this post. The Membership Services Coordinator still plays an important role within Depression Alliance today.

Working with IVAR was both enjoyable and emotional at the same time. The Chair was given the chance to reflect on some of the difficulties that the organisation had been facing and I was able to explore my new role as CEO with the help of an independent perspective. It was reassuring to work with people who had worked in the charity sector and understood that there was a need to continue the work of organisations like ours.

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⁵ The Tudor Trust Support Project is delivered by IVAR and provides strategic support to organisations funded by the Tudor Trust.



Bell View is an independent charity in the village of Belford, Northumberland. The charity runs a community resource centre and provides day care facilities for the elderly via its trading arm. In 2009, IVAR provided strategic support to the organisation at a time of great change. Christine Harris, acting Chair, looks back at the difference that the support from IVAR made to Bell View.

I wouldn't say that the organisation was in distress, but at the time IVAR came to work with us things were moving very quickly: we were becoming a much bigger fish. We had recently taken on the running of a private day care facility that is now the trading arm of our community resource centre. Getting IVAR's support was great timing because we needed space to reflect on the organisation and look at how we could become more business-like.

Some of our trustees and staff were cautious about getting involved in a strategic review but the majority welcomed the opportunity to step back from the nitty-gritty. IVAR came to interview people from all layers of the organisation including trustees, staff and volunteers, so I felt that they really took the time to understand our organisation and grasp its ethos. As a result, they were able to uncover things that we, as an organisation, had not been explicitly aware of.

IVAR's external, unthreatening and objective perspective, combined with their knowledge and expertise, helped us to identify our organisational problems, vocalise and clarify our thoughts, and put our strategic decisions into practice. IVAR facilitated an away day, giving us a chance to socialise, get away from the centre and build up a level of trust with IVAR that meant we were able collectively to address some of the more challenging issues.

Following working with IVAR, we obtained professional human resources support for Bell View, introduced an administrative support role and started senior management team meetings to facilitate working together more. We have also developed a better induction process for our volunteers and established regular communications via a volunteer newsletter and social occasions.

I was surprised to find that the support from IVAR gave us a confidence boost. It was really good to know that people on the outside were interested in our organisation and it made us realise how far we'd come as an organisation. Although there were things that weren't quite right, or we wanted to change, we were on the right track.

We hope that those using our services will notice the difference. They can now cherry pick from the wide range of services that we provide and there is better integration between the resource centre and the day care facilities. As a result of IVAR's support, we were able to sit down and think more strategically about the management of Bell View, looking at what we do well, what people want from us and what we can provide. We hope this is leading to a flexible, responsive, quality service.

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Findings from the research have strongly influenced our strategies to support capacity building.

Big and small: Capacity building, small organisations and the Big Lottery Fund

Research to support the work of the Big Lottery Fund

The Big Lottery Fund (BIG) is a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Most of its funding is awarded to voluntary and community sector organisations throughout the UK. In 2010, IVAR published research, commissioned by BIG, about the capacity building needs of small organisations. Here Steve Browning, Evaluation and Research Analyst at BIG, shares his views about working with IVAR.

IVAR led a project that set out to consider the capacity building needs of small voluntary groups that apply to BIG. The study came at a crucial time for BIG and has been influential both within our organisation and beyond. Findings from the research have strongly influenced our thinking about, and strategies to support capacity building, notably in England.

The research provided me with a useful opportunity to carry through work on a number of fronts – developing and promoting greater clarity in our application guidance, contributing to intelligent funding and BIG’s strategies on capacity building in England.

I was inspired by discussions with the research team about the experience of working with a large bureaucracy like ours. Unfortunately, I was off sick at a crucial point during the study but my absence seemed to reinforce the engagement of others in the work; widening internal ownership, involvement and interest.

In our discussions with the IVAR team, we jointly reviewed and changed some of our earlier plans for the study as the work developed. This was a strength of the process and IVAR’s flexibility ultimately led to a better and more influential study than might otherwise have been the case. IVAR is certainly a recognised expert in this field: their knowledge and confidence allowed us to work together more productively. IVAR is academic in its approach, for us that added a certain amount of authority and an impressive degree of wider expertise to the study.

The Big Lottery Fund, 1 Plough Place,
London EC4A 1DE

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www.biglotteryfund.org.uk



Related publications

- IVAR (2010) *BIG and small: Capacity building, small organisations and the Big Lottery Fund*, BIG: London
- Cairns, B., Harris, M. and Young, P. (2005) 'Building the capacity of the voluntary nonprofit sector: Challenges of theory and practice', *International Journal of Public Administration*, 28 (9 & 10), 869-885



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Working with IVAR has changed the way the management committee is run – we discovered that they actually wanted to be more involved with the organisation.

Making time for reflection

Dalgarno Neighbourhood Trust organisational review

Dalgarno Neighbourhood Trust (DNT) is a community hub working to develop the capacity and skills of socially disadvantaged community members and to increase active participation and enterprise in the community. It is based in West London and works with over 2,500 people every year. In 2010, IVAR worked with DNT to provide strategic support⁶ over six months. Vicki Laville-Davies, Director, describes her experience of working with IVAR.

At the time IVAR came to work with us, we wanted to spend some time thinking about the ways in which we could improve our governance, reflect on our impact and help create a lasting legacy for our work.

It was unnerving at first as we had never worked this way with an external facilitator before but IVAR quickly put us at ease. They worked closely with me and included me in the whole planning process. The staff and trustees attended half day sessions every two to three months which enabled everyone to reach a common understanding of our role in being accountable, our impact in the community and how the organisation needed to be supported by effective governance and systems. It was great to know that I could talk to someone about things and did not feel isolated. IVAR staff were straight talking and did not overwhelm people.

Working with IVAR has changed the way the management committee is run – we discovered that they actually wanted to be more involved with the organisation. Trustees now feel strengthened as a group and have a better understanding of what everyone's role and responsibility is. We're moving closer together as a team.

We learned that there is help out there and we can reach out to get advice. It worked as IVAR were objective, supportive and approachable. Their personalities helped – they get alongside you and have a good sense of humour. We now feel we are in a stronger position because of their support.

Initially, because we deliver frontline services, we found it difficult to make time for this sort of exercise. However its value has persuaded us to ensure that we make more time for this kind of reflection.

Dalgarno Neighbourhood Trust,
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London W10 5QB

020 8969 6300
www.dnt.myzen.co.uk



⁶ Support was provided as part of the Anchors Strategic Development Programme which is run by Locality and funded by The City Bridge Trust.

Making a difference through collaborative research

Newlands Community Association and Bede House take part in impact study

Between 2009 and 2010, IVAR and New Philanthropy Capital led a collaborative research project with nine community organisations to develop and test approaches to impact assessment. Two of the participating organisations, Newlands Community Association and Bede House, share their experience of this research.

Newlands Community Association (NCA) in Bradford is a community anchor working with local residents, groups and organisations to improve local conditions. NCA comprises four community centres, a community hospital, doctors' surgery, pharmacy, undeveloped land, and retail space. Tony Holdich, CEO of NCA, describes his experience of participating in this collaborative research project.

When IVAR first approached us to take part in the research, I wasn't sure how useful it would be or whether it was the right fit for NCA. I initially agreed just to attend the first meeting with directors of the other participating organisations and researchers from IVAR and NPC. However, this meeting was so stimulating and interesting that it made me take a step back and decide to give the research a go. After this, the NCA Development Worker and I attended every single meeting!

IVAR were skilled at managing this collaboration; running the workshops and project meetings. They made sure everyone had a chance to contribute and didn't allow any one person to dominate the conversation. As part of the research, each participating multi-purpose community organisation had to decide how they wanted to examine the impact of their own organisation. IVAR helped us to consider this in a balanced and open way; we talked

it all through and went away on our own to work on some of the material.

I found the way that IVAR engaged the whole organisation really beneficial. Our Development Worker learned a great deal from participating and she presented part of the research alongside IVAR at a conference, which was great.

Taking part in this research helped our board to sit back and think about the direction of the organisation. We began using the term 'community anchor' as a result of this research and later we developed a new business plan. IVAR came and ran a development session for the board, this was great for me and really pushed the board's thinking forward.

The research came at just the right time – things were difficult financially and it was clear that our local landscape was shifting, with lots of partner organisations in crisis. We needed to work towards being financially sustainable and part of that meant deepening our understanding of the impact we have and improving how we communicate that externally.

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The research helped us to build the case for our work and has enabled that story to be told.

Bede House is a multi-purpose community organisation founded in 1938 and based in Southwark, London. Today it focuses on three neighbourhoods in Southwark, undertaking youth and community work, providing services for people with learning disabilities and supporting individuals confronting domestic violence or hate crime. Nick Dunne, Director of Bede House, reflects on his experience of working with IVAR.

When IVAR approached us I had no hesitation in agreeing to participate in the research: I was aware of IVAR already and considered them a 'trusted brand' in terms of their knowledge of the sector. We've taken part in research before but have found that some academic researchers don't understand the demands that participation places on an organisation like ours. IVAR were different, they acknowledged the time involved in the research and provided a small payment in recognition of this – that was the icing on the cake for us!

The research process was excellent, particularly the fact that it was relationship driven. IVAR took time to visit each organisation and learn about what we do. They managed the momentum well and made sure that time spent was always used well.

Taking part in the research helped us to improve the way we explain our work to the local authority. The research helped us to build the case for our work and has enabled that story to be told. For a local authority commissioner to hear the difference that has been made to someone's life from the money that the authority spent, that is so important.

During the research, relationships developed between Bede House and another participating organisation and we wanted to explore our options for working together. Our membership organisation, bassac⁷, provided funding for IVAR to help our two organisations look at common areas and relationships. Building relationships like this was really important for me; we've not sat down with a research partner and done this before; looked from our perspective at what needs to happen.

Since the research ended, I've really appreciated the work to disseminate findings and develop thinking. Often, a report gets published and that's it, but IVAR ran an event with London Funders and I was invited to talk about emerging findings in relation to impact. This was a great chance to put over what we do in our own words and to develop thinking about impact amongst voluntary organisations and funders.

Bede House, 351 Southwark Park Road,
London SE16 2JW

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www.bedehouse.org.uk



Related publications

IVAR (2011) *Assessing the impact of multi-purpose community organisations: Final report of a collaborative action research approach*, IVAR: London

⁷ In April 2011, bassac merged with the Development Trusts Association to become Locality.

Final words

Our roots, in the voluntary and community sector and academia, mean that our practice is both rigorous and attuned to the organisations we work with.

We're not prescriptive or over-simplistic about complex problems – we work alongside individuals and organisations, developing relationships of trust and mutual respect, in order to give practitioners the opportunities and tools to solve their own problems.

Our approach – **collaborative, practical, problem-solving** – results in meaningful and lasting change to individuals, organisations and communities.

To discuss how we might work with you, please contact Leila Baker, Research Manager, on 020 7380 3008 or at leila@ivar.org.uk.

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