



Working in Place Case Study

The Rank Foundation's place-based programme in Dundee



Overview

The Rank Foundation runs its place-based programme alongside responsive grant-making. It has used this approach in over five places over the last decade. Each time the approach evolves/develops, however, certain features remain consistent, including grants to local projects plus some capacity building and convening activity.

This case study is about the Rank Foundation's work in Dundee. The Foundation is also continuing to work in Hull on an extension of a previous programme. The case study is based on interviews with Rank Foundation staff and trustees, the local coordinator in Dundee and a review of programme documents/materials.

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1. About the approach

The Rank Foundation's place-based approach has been led by the CEO: 'it's his vision, backed by the trustees'. The motivation for working in place is about adding value and maximising the funding:

'we have modest funds so it is about taking a proactive approach to concentrate effort and be as effective as possible ... [place-based working] has evolved as part of a conversation – it wasn't a strategic decision or to 'tick a box' working in a place-based way or which areas we choose'.

Learning from previous experiences in Burnley, Corby and Blackpool led the Foundation to put place-based working at the heart of its strategy as a way of delivering an engaged philanthropy approach.

The work in Dundee launched in June 2015, providing £2million worth of funding to local organisations over three years. A total of 21 projects are being funded across a range of fields, built around a strategy of developing leadership and encouraging enterprise whilst caring for the marginalised and the needy. Representatives from grantee organisations, the funder and other local stakeholders sit on a steering group which meets quarterly.

The Foundation also engages a local coordinator in Dundee – a feature it has found worked well in previous approaches:

‘we’ve found that they tend to emerge during the development work, it’s often luck or good fortune that you find them.’

Alongside project delivery, grantee organisations are expected to work together where/when appropriate, and are supported to do so by the coordinator who makes links and raises opportunities for them:

‘There’s a Muslim befriending service and a theatre group – they can share services which didn’t happen before.’

2. Challenges faced

Managing expectations

Being an ‘outsider’, and perceived as such, can be problematic, and sometimes the Foundation has been treated as if it is ‘dropping in’ to an area. One of the challenges within this has been choosing who to work with and how to communicate these decisions carefully:

‘you can’t work with everyone so we select based on the purpose we want to achieve and try to manage this sensitively.’

The local coordinator is a key part of managing expectations as the role is fulfilled by someone from the area who leads day-to-day delivery. However, this role has also given rise to challenges in itself, since the coordinator sits ‘in the middle’ – employed by the Foundation but working directly with the local community. The Foundation has developed the local coordinator role over the course of several place-based programmes but feels it is still tricky to define and to establish clear parameters:

‘projects’ relationship with me [the coordinator] will be influenced by my relationship with Rank ... I’m a Rank employee but I am working with the projects.’

Finally, there is the challenge of expectations around commitment and exit – much time and work has gone into building relationships and enabling foundation staff to visit Dundee, but it can be hard to then leave at the end of a programme:

‘you need to spend a lot of time in the area being physically visible ... people end up thinking that’s your job and it can be hard to manage expectations. We’re saying “we’re here with you” and then we’re not.’

Time intensive and investment of resources required up front

Place-based working requires considerable time to be invested in developing relationships, understanding local need and designing a programme. The Foundation has learned that sometimes this means investing significant time in scoping a programme before deciding not to progress any further. There are also more practical capacity and travel costs associated with the need for staff to build a local presence in the area, though this has been mitigated to some degree by employing a local coordinator.

Understanding and measuring success

Finally, the Foundation continues to grapple with understanding and measuring success in place-based work:

‘how to separate what is successful for us as a funder vs success for individual organisations’.

With support from a consultant, it has used its work in Hull to identify ‘how we add value by bringing organisations/people together – the magnifying effect’. They have invested time in conversations about how to measure this ‘magnifying effect’ – key elements of which are the steering group, collaboration, local coordinator and a shared performance management system.

In Dundee, the participating organisations, Foundation staff and local coordinator worked together to agree a theory of change. Alongside this, the Foundation has experimented with different approaches to reporting for grantees – for example, providing online monitoring systems – whilst acknowledging the importance the organisation’s need to be able to tailor these for its own use:

‘not everyone needs a Rolls Royce – we needed to help the project to tailor it [the monitoring system] to their needs and make sure it is appropriate. It’s more tricky if you are seeking non-quantitative, harder-to -measure changes.’

3. What helps?

Taking the time to understand the area and build relationships

All interviewees emphasised the importance of taking time to learn about an area before starting to work there: ‘Getting to know a place first is key – you need to develop knowledge and find out about local resources – as well as accept that you might have to walk away.’ This also requires specific skills of staff to be able to work in an exploratory, iterative way:

‘it is a particular skill set – curiosity, asking questions. It really requires learning from experience and being prepared to be hands-on.’

As a result, the Foundation places a great emphasis on relationships and face-to-face interaction:

‘It is about assessing, thinking, engaging.’ This is done by ‘visiting, visiting, visiting’ during the scoping phase: ‘in Dundee we have spent 18 months doing reconnaissance – knocking on doors, finding out who does what.’

It also often means that Foundation staff are working with different types of organisations to those funded through their traditional grant-making programmes:

‘it is about working with individuals to some extent, not just organisations.’

The grants manager explained that the Dundee programme includes an angling group, which initially seemed unusual, but they have seen the group contribute in terms of community building, integration and reducing criminal behaviour – all key aims of the programme.

Employing a local coordinator

A key part of the Foundation’s place-based approach is to employ a local coordinator who is able to ‘act as a conduit to get resources to the community’. In Dundee the coordinator is a recently retired, ex-council CEO who is ‘well-respected and trusted’. The Foundation was clear from the outset that it wanted to work with someone who would be perceived as a worthy leader by the community. This meant working in a slightly different way to its previous place-based work, since the Dundee coordinator is from a local government background and the Foundation has tended not to work with the local council in other areas, but in Dundee it felt ‘right for the area’.

Being responsive to changes in context

The programme is built around the Foundation's learning about what local organisations need, which the coordinator describes as both unusual and beneficial:

'I've seen government money, lottery funding ad nauseam but it is always very prescribed and didn't give organisations scope to say what is needed.'

The way in which the Dundee programme has been set up allows organisations to work in partnership with the funder and provides a degree of independence: 'the letter to the projects offering the grant was great – it wasn't prescriptive but it gave the opportunity for them to grow as a project without having to go back to "daddy" [the funder].'

Being responsive to local need means that the Foundation is also thinking about what role it might play in supporting local infrastructure and how to support organisations to take up new opportunities:

'commissioning for example, it's possible that we'd lead a bidding consortium – we've done that before – to help get resources into Hull, for example, but there is definite risk there and it's an unusual move.'

4. What has been learned so far?

Rank Foundation's place-based approach works best in areas that have some existing capacity – 'We want to tap into the next phase of their development rather than start at the beginning. It is about identifying an area that is not on 'the outs' but where we can build on what is already there ... Some of it is 'on the up' so we are riding the wave'. To make this judgement, it is important to learn about the local area as much as possible:

'there is no one size fits all – we need to understand the local map and make the right connections. Otherwise what we are doing is just a sticking plaster.'

Place-based work requires commitment to an area and realism about what the eventual contribution might be – 'It might take five to ten years of trying these approaches before we can really understand the value'. In addition, working long-term enables the Foundation to respond to changes in local context:

'The fortunes of a place can wax and wane but this tends to happen over a long period. With a long-term approach you can allow for flex in a place. But you have to be prepared to take the time to allow things to brew.'

Employing a local coordinator who is from the area, well-networked and respected locally is valuable – and worth the additional cost.

There is a fine balance between being directive/setting conditions for participation and allowing groups to engage as suits them. Building on learning from their previous programmes, the Foundation decided to make attendance at steering groups mandatory and training for an online monitoring system compulsory:

'There is a possibility that we are being more directive now from what we have learned in Hull.'