



Working in Place Case Study

Building Change Trust –
supporting local infrastructure
via endowment in
Northern Ireland



Overview

The Building Change Trust was established by the Big Lottery Fund with a National Lottery grant of £10million as an investment for community capacity building and promotion of the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland.

This case study is based on interviews with staff and trustees at Building Change Trust, Big Lottery Fund NI and Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) as well as review of Lloyds TSB Foundation for Scotland and East Ayrshire Council, as well as a review of evaluation reports on the initiative.

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1. About the approach

The Building Change Trust (BCT) was established in 2008 with a £10million endowment from the Big Lottery Fund (BLF). Organisations and partnerships were invited to bid to become the Corporate Trustee of the endowment and to deliver an agreed business plan. A partnership of five organisations¹ came together to form the independent organisation, each with the right to nominate a director to the Board. Currently, BCT has a service level agreement with the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, which employs four members of staff to manage and administer the trust.

The endowment underpinning BCT is to be invested and spent out over a 10-year period (ending in 2018) on 'community capacity building and promotion of the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland' (BCT, 2016). To deliver this agenda, BCT funds and commissions a range of activity on five themes: social finance; social innovation; inspiring impact; collaboration; and civic thinking. For example, BCT has: commissioned research into the supply and demand of social finance in NI; commissioned organisational support programmes (e.g. CollaborationNI²); and given grants to infrastructure organisations to help them provide support and training around impact measurement.

¹ Community Evaluation NI; Business in the Community (NI); Volunteer Now; Rural Community Network; and the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland.

² Collaboration Northern Ireland offers bespoke organisational support and helps organisations in the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector to collaborate. <http://collaborationni.nicva.org/>

2. Challenges faced

Time and developing relationships

One of the challenges that BCT faced initially was managing the 'tension between being seen to do something and meet a need, and taking time to develop the trust as an entity itself'. The trust board is separate from the five original partner organisations that developed the business plan; this meant that the board had to find a way to take ownership of a plan that they had not been involved in writing, and the trust was 'trying to wrestle itself away from its founding partners'. As a result, for the first of couple of years the trust was described as 'finding its feet' and initial publicity about the endowment was felt to be unhelpful by some:

'A big announcement of £10million and then nothing much happening wasn't helpful.'

Managing expectations – resources and contribution

The investment of £10million was less than 0.2% of the voluntary sector's estimated annual income in Northern Ireland and the Trust was being set up at a time when funding was tight for the sector. As a result, it had to be 'clear that we wouldn't fund service delivery or mission-related activity by organisations. We had to think about areas where, through a combination of research and development, targeted funding and advocacy, we could stimulate some change'. In other words, the trust had to be very clear about where it could and would add value and communicate this appropriately in order to manage the sector's expectations.

The process of identifying these niche areas, ultimately arriving at the five themes mentioned previously, took some time. Social finance, collaboration and work on impact practice (through the Inspiring Impact programme) emerged readily as needed, but social innovation and creative space for civic thinking were slower to arrive at. On reflection, it was thought that perhaps the latter themes only emerged once BCT had developed the confidence and ability to design and deliver programmes.

3. What helps?

Independent voice

Being an independent trust has enabled BCT to influence, spark debate and 'say some hard things that others can't say sometimes'. This has been very timely given that many voluntary sector organisations are 'so focused on survival and what's next for them as an organisation, they are probably losing capacity for policy and influencing work, so it's good to have someone who can bring some of that together.'

Being based in the place

By focusing explicitly on the voluntary sector in Northern Ireland, BCT has been able to identify the particular needs of the local voluntary sector, as well as to translate knowledge and intelligence for the context of Northern Ireland. For example, BCT became a partner in the Inspiring Impact partnership³ in order that it could 'roll out and embed that work and those materials across NI'. It also funded research on the independence of the voluntary sector in Northern Ireland, mirroring work undertaken by the Baring Foundation in the UK. Arguably, the focus on place has meant that BCT can effectively target its activities to have the greatest impact on the voluntary sector in Northern Ireland and thus directly support the fund's mission.

³ Inspiring Impact is a UK-wide collaborative programme, working with the charity sector to help organisations know what to measure and how to measure it. <http://inspiringimpact.org/>

Getting the right people involved – understanding who to work with

A number of participants acknowledged that BCT board members and staff are local to Northern Ireland and they are embedded within the voluntary sector. As a result, the board and staff are acutely aware of the needs of the sector, have strong links to the local sector and 'will still be around and involved after BCT has finished'. It was also noted that each of the original bid partners 'brought a great deal of experience and knowledge of different parts of the sector'.

4. What has been learned so far?

Setting up the endowment

There has been some learning for the Big Lottery Fund in terms of setting up an endowment. For example, they support their original decision to approve a partnership bid, as opposed to a single provider, because of the different experiences and expertise that each partner has brought to the trust. In the case of BCT, it was felt that 'this process was a mechanism to encourage shared thinking about the future of the sector'. However, in future the Big Lottery Fund might consider 'a more developmental approach of allowing a trust to form and develop its own business plan', given the difficulties that were experienced as a result of trying to deliver a pre-developed business plan.

The provision of a fund was also seen as giving BCT a degree of independence and the ability to try new things and take some risks (accepting that not everything would be a success):

'few organisations would have had the ability to do this given the restrictions around money/resources and allocation of these'.

Balancing quick wins and longer-term strategic development

There has been a need across the life of the trust to 'get the balance right between quick wins and longer-term strategic development'. Arguably, the trust has achieved this given the variety of activity it has funded, from system-wide research to enabling the delivery of bespoke organisational support. One thing that has helped here is having clear direction from the chair and board that 'we had to do more than traditional grant-making'.

Relationship building

Building relationships with a wide range of partners, along with the need to work collaboratively and be 'respectful of longstanding players who have been working in this sector for many years', has been crucial. These relationships have enabled the trust to access knowledge and expertise both from within and outside of Northern Ireland, and it has ensured that the trust has the buy-in from key partners who directly support the trust's mission.