



Institute for Voluntary
Action Research

Briefing: Listening to people

Are you a grantmaker? Do you want to shape grants with the people they are intended to help? Read on for a series of questions to consider when you want to involve beneficiaries in grant-making.

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As more and more funders set out to involve beneficiaries in grant-making, we share 10 things to think about drawing from our 2013 research with the Big Lottery Fund:

- Our findings highlighted the importance of avoiding a 'one size fits all approach', as beneficiary involvement in grant-making occurs on a spectrum and varies according to the purpose, intensity and methods of involvement.
- By drawing on literature about the 'spaces' and 'places' in which participation (or involvement) happens, we found the idea of 'invited spaces' (where beneficiaries are asked to participate in grant-making) can help shed light on the dynamics of beneficiary involvement.
- Our findings suggested that beneficiary involvement can be strategic as well as flexible when appropriate policy and practice are embedded in a grant-making framework.

We identified a set of questions to help think through how you might shape grants with the people they are intended to help. For the purposes of the study, we used the language of 'involving beneficiaries' and 'funding frameworks' – and this is reflected in the questions below.

Designing a process

1) Planning

- What stages of grant-making will beneficiaries participate in?
- Are the stages and activities in programme development sufficiently linked with beneficiary involvement activities?
- How will you ensure the pace of grant-making is appropriate for the beneficiary group involved?

2) Purpose and focus

- What is the overall purpose and focus of the programme? Why will it benefit from involving beneficiaries?
- Which point(s) in the funding process would most benefit from beneficiaries' knowledge and experience: needs assessment, programme design, programme award?
- Which point(s) in the funding process might beneficiaries most want to influence?
- Does the programme aspire to hand over control of decisions about spending to beneficiaries?

3) Intensity and method of involvement

- Who will be involved? Do you know what kind of support they are likely to need and what kind of methods might suit them best?
- Will the beneficiary group be involved in all stages of grant-making, or within specific stages?
- Will the funding development process be able to proceed at a pace that is suitable for beneficiary involvement? Will other time constraints make this difficult to maintain?
- What are the relevant experiences and skills required of beneficiaries? How will you convene a beneficiary group with the necessary range of experience regarding an issue or theme?

4) Support and resources

- Does the beneficiary group include vulnerable people or people with complex and multiple needs? What might this mean for the method and intensity of involvement?
- Do you need to work with an intermediary organisation (e.g. for advice on making contact with beneficiaries, to facilitate their participation and support them? This level of support may have cost implications)
- Do you have the necessary resources to support the people you would like to involve in the process at the relevant point(s)?

Putting your design into practice

5) Recruitment, roles and expectations

Instigating a formal process for recruitment (application forms and informal interviews) can mean beneficiaries feel more valued because they were selected to participate.

- How much time is required for the recruitment and induction process to ensure an appropriate group membership and dynamic is established?
- How will you ensure contact is established with those groups that you want to hear from but find harder to reach?
- How can the recruitment process usefully prepare beneficiaries for their specific role within the grant-making process?

6) Payment

- Is payment for beneficiaries important to confirm beneficiaries' commitment and demonstrate their role is valued?

7) Preparing beneficiaries

- Are you clear about what role people will play in the grant-making process, and which elements they will be able to influence?
- What background information will be provided to beneficiaries? (e.g. a timeline for involvement, provision of payment and expenses etc.).

- How will you ensure beneficiaries are clear about their roles and the expectations from their involvement? Have you described the activities they will undertake?
- How will you explain your funding framework to the people you invite to get involved?

8) Preparing staff

- How will you ensure that the staff and committee members are clear about their role in listening to people?
- Are there any processes that need to be adapted to enhance beneficiary involvement?

9) Support and materials

- What practical support might be needed? E.g. travel, accommodation and other logistical arrangements.
- What emotional or pastoral support needs might people have? Think about the issues being addressed and the depth of their involvement.
- How should materials be adapted to ensure they are accessible for the particular beneficiary group?

10) Maintaining momentum

These questions are especially relevant when a beneficiary group is to be involved throughout several stages of grant-making.

- **Plan sessions around key stages:** Have you scheduled beneficiaries' meetings and activities so they align with key stages in the overall funding development process?
- **Beneficiary group membership:** What mechanisms will you put in place to recruit new members at key times to rejuvenate the group, or when an existing member can no longer continue?

Further reading

You can download our full report [Beneficiary involvement in funding processes at BIG](https://www.ivar.org.uk/research-report/beneficiary-involvement-in-funding-processes-at-big/)¹ or the resulting [Framework for thinking about involving beneficiaries in funding processes](https://www.ivar.org.uk/research-report/framework-for-thinking-about-involving-beneficiaries-in-funding-processes-at-big/)² from ivar.org.uk or the [Big Lottery Fund's website](https://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/research/making-the-most-of-funding/involving-beneficiaries)³.

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¹ <https://www.ivar.org.uk/research-report/beneficiary-involvement-in-funding-processes-at-big/>

² <https://www.ivar.org.uk/research-report/framework-for-thinking-about-involving-beneficiaries-in-funding-processes-at-big/>

³ <https://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/research/making-the-most-of-funding/involving-beneficiaries>