

The power of face-to-face grant-making: Small grants in Hartlepool

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IVAR

Institute for Voluntary
Action Research

**the
Tudortrust**



Authorship and acknowledgements

This paper was written by Annie Caffyn between September and November 2019, based on perspectives from the local community groups that attended the grant-making event in June 2019; feedback from the intermediary group, the Wharton Trust; the views and thoughts of trustees and staff from The Tudor Trust (Tudor) who were involved in this experience; and observations of a member from IVAR who joined Tudor in Hartlepool for the conversations and the subsequent decision-making session.

About The Tudor Trust

The Tudor Trust is an independent grant-making trust which supports voluntary and community groups working in any part of the UK.

About the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR)

IVAR is an independent research charity working closely with people and organisations striving for social change. IVAR works nationally across the voluntary public and funding sectors, using research to develop practical responses to challenges and creating opportunities for people to learn from their findings.

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Foreword

Christopher Graves
Director, The Tudor Trust

In June 2017, Tudor was one of many funders involved in the response to the Grenfell Tower fire. Based just 15 minutes' walk from Grenfell Tower, Tudor was well placed to facilitate the delivery of the London Funders Community Core Costs Fund to a hundred community organisations. Grant managers from seven different funders were involved in outreach and collective decision-making, distributing £1.1million to help meet the immediate costs of responding to the emergency.

The response presented funders with a challenge: to get funding quickly to small, front-line organisations including charities, CICs, local faith groups, constituted community groups, schools and residents' associations. We had to balance due diligence against speed of response. Operating outside our comfort zone, we had to act quickly and instinctively. We learnt a lot.

Face-to-face engagement, listening and co-creating applications were vital elements of the fund. The process allowed us to be alongside the organisations, giving space for applicants to talk about their experience while also supporting them to think about their needs and to 'frame' an application quickly and easily. We found that practical elements such as simple application forms, conversations taking place in the community, having 'welcomers' at surgeries and offering refreshments all made a difference.

The Institute for Voluntary Action Research's (IVAR) report, [*The possible, not the perfect*](#) looks at what learning can be drawn from funder responses to three different emergencies in the summer of 2017. The report challenges funders to consider how we can bring greater urgency, responsible lightness of touch and more open relationships into our everyday work. In response, we asked ourselves how we could replicate aspects of this 'on the ground', quick, face-to-face approach to making small grants in a non-emergency situation. How would it feel to shorten our lead time for a grant (anything up to four months), and work with community groups to create an application together through a conversation? Might this be a better way of engaging with the people and communities we want to work with?

We thought carefully about how this approach could be of benefit, and do no harm to the people, organisations and communities we wanted to work with. Taking into consideration the size of the sector, the organisations who could help us guide the work, the strength of infrastructure bodies, and the number of applications received and grants that Tudor has made in the past five years, we decided to focus on Hartlepool.

In the first half of 2019 we worked with organisations in the Tees Valley area to get to know Hartlepool, and to identify groups which might benefit from a small grant. In June, Tudor staff and trustees spent three days in Hartlepool, with an afternoon dedicated to meeting local groups. A trustee and a member of staff listened, and during a half-hour conversation, with 20 groups, together drew up a funding request. In the few hours after the conversations, trustees and staff came together, reflected on the conversations, and approved grants of up to £5,000 for each group.

The following report shares some of the thoughts of the community organisations involved in the conversations. It reflects only a moment in time, capturing the immediate feedback of the groups in the month after the event. There is much more for us to learn, as we'll be following up with the groups six months on, and again over the coming year.

We are grateful to all those who made this possible: the organisations and community groups both directly and indirectly involved, local anchor organisations, local funders, and all those who gave us their time to lay the ground for this to be a fruitful experience for all involved. We would also like to thank our learning partner, IVAR, who accompanied and appropriately challenged us on this journey.

This paper has helped Tudor staff and trustees to reflect on the importance of trust, to ask how we keep learning from the people we met in Hartlepool, and think about what we do next. We hope it might be useful to others considering similar approaches too. How far lessons learned can be incorporated in our broader grant-making processes is now under active discussion.

Introduction

IVAR's reflections from the Hartlepool Conversations

It's healthy for our sector – the more we see of this the better

In June 2019, a team from The Tudor Trust ('Tudor'), including grants managers and trustees, visited Hartlepool to test out a way of paring back bureaucracy and placing relationships and trust at the forefront of their grant-making, through a process built around one-to-one conversations with applicants. These conversations were set up as a trial to see if Tudor could respond to the challenge set out in IVAR's [The possible, not the perfect](#) and replicate the approach to grant-making pioneered in response to the Grenfell Tower fire, in a non-emergency context:

There is an opportunity here and it would be a shame to let it go. Let's not get too bogged down in all the problems and challenges – all it takes is a few organisations who are willing to get on with trying out some of these ideas to see how they work.¹

The process involved members of Tudor sitting alongside staff and volunteers of local community groups, hearing about their projects and activities in Hartlepool, and then co-producing applications for funding.

This reflection piece is based on perspectives from: the local community groups that attended the event (gathered through speaking to groups on the day, an online survey completed by 19 of the 20 groups involved, and a small number of follow-up telephone conversations); feedback from the intermediary group, the Wharton Trust; the views and thoughts of Tudor trustees and staff who were involved in this experience; and observations of a member from IVAR who joined Tudor in Hartlepool for the conversations and the subsequent decision-making session. The focus of this paper is on the experience and implications of making grants in this way, in the context of Tudor's expectations and ambitions for the process:

- 'Making the grant process more human'
- 'Putting the relational aspect on show'
- 'Creating more proportionate and accessible experiences for organisations'

¹[IVAR \(2018\), The possible, not the perfect: Learning from funder responses to emergencies, IVAR: London](#)

1. Characteristics of the conversations and process

'Small grants' for local community groups

Tudor went into each conversation with an amount of up to £5,000 in mind for each group. In total, Tudor gave £81,920 to 20 local community groups. For 18 out of the 19 groups that responded to the online survey, this process was their first experience of applying to a trust or foundation for a grant. The conversations with Tudor provided them with an open and informal opportunity to meet with Grants Managers and trustees, to share their project's story and ambitions, and to apply for funding.

Careful planning and thoughtful connecting

A key characteristic of this process was Tudor's investment of time in scoping and planning the event. Part of this involved speaking with local groups that have valuable insight into the Hartlepool voluntary sector and hearing their perspectives on how to appropriately design and approach the 'conversations'. In addition, a strong relationship with the Wharton Trust, a long-standing grantee, enabled Tudor to obtain a broad picture of the context within Hartlepool, with scoping visits building on these discussions. Ensuring that a wide variety of local groups were aware of the event and that they felt comfortable to attend was another key feature of the set-up process.

Openness and clarity of expectations

Before the local groups arrived, the Tudor team considered how this was also a new experience for Tudor trustees themselves, and how there was an element of '*putting the relational aspect [of the Tudor approach] on show*'. Thus, both the Tudor team and the local groups were '*learning through this together*'; and the conversations were very much framed as a learning exercise, focusing on *how* everyone involved experienced the process. Expectations that the event was an experimental way of grant-making were made clear from the outset: as the intermediary organisation noted: '*there was no expectation [amongst the local groups] that we'll get this year on year*'.

All groups agreed with the statement that they felt they could be '*open and honest*' during the conversation with Tudor. Although five found the conversation '*nerve-wracking*', all agreed that they felt comfortable throughout: '*we didn't expect it to be so open*'. This sense of openness was cultivated through the initial welcome from the Tudor support team; friendly and candid conversations; the

collaboration around framing and documenting a funding request; and the trust placed on applicant groups to steer the discussion.

Intentional listening and two-sided conversations

The conversations were conducted between a Tudor trustee, a Tudor staff member and representatives of the local groups. All the groups that completed the survey agreed that Tudor *'really listened to what is important to our work'*. The collaborative element of the conversations allowed the groups to guide Tudor towards the areas that either needed external support or that demonstrated their passion for what they do:

You can express yourself, explaining the importance of what you do, getting our passion and drive across. We really believe in our project and can get that across during a conversation rather than over two pages of a form.

90% of groups strongly agreed with the statement that *'it was easier to describe our work in a conversation than through a written application form'*. Although none of the groups said that they would *'prefer to apply through a written application form'*, three expressed a preference for completing a form before having a conversation, while stressing the value of face-to-face discussions to enable Tudor to understand their work.

2. The value of this approach to grant-making

The power of face-to-face

The chance to be honest with a funder means we can actually get it right.

All of the groups that completed the online survey agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, 'I think that the face-to-face conversation helped Tudor to understand our work'. This was echoed in the follow-up calls: 'It didn't feel like an interview at all'; 'we could say so much more, and in so much more depth over a thirty-minute conversation than over any form':

The whole 'meet the funder' idea was ideal for us little community groups. Doing the paperwork can be very daunting and to be given the chance to see the funder I believe allows them to see the passion, not just read about it. Sometimes this is very hard to put into writing.

I felt like Tudor would go away from today with a better understanding of what their contribution would do.

The value of face-to-face extended beyond the individual applications for a grant. Tudor witnessed the interconnectedness of the community groups and the relationships within the room between different groups. The event reaffirmed or sparked new connections across groups all working within the same community. This was echoed by the views of the intermediary organisation:

It reconnected us as a sector. That hasn't happened before. There's no infrastructure body here so we don't really meet. It almost felt like a reconnection of those small groups which is so important. It gave a sense of the scale of our sector here and the breadth, kick-starting sideways conversations.

The immediacy of the application conversation and the fast turnaround of grants being agreed, although perhaps daunting before the event, meant that the groups were able to express the breadth and detail of their work in person, 'rather than agonising behind a computer thinking about what [Tudor] want to hear in 200 words'. As a Tudor trustee commented: 'we were talking beyond theory and beyond bullet points. Instead we were talking in stories'.

The value of 'small' grants

What this will allow is an injection of money, allowing people to look beyond the horizon.

The term 'small' is relative – for some of the groups that attended the event in Hartlepool, a grant of £5,000 may be their total annual income. The intermediary organisation commented on how this amount of money has 'fast-forwarded [one group] 18-months and has "made the difference between doing something and not doing it". If they hadn't received that grant, that activity wouldn't happen. They'll make that money go a long way':

Three or four grand for some organisations can be huge, it can allow communities to fix themselves. This will do a large amount of work in a small area.

The scale of impact that these smaller grants may have in Hartlepool should not be underestimated. One Tudor trustee commented that this experience 'reminded us of the power of small grants'. One staff member from Tudor also described how the event created links with a new cohort of grantees that Tudor otherwise might not have met. This cohort's power at 'creating real community cohesion' through 'invisible social glue' was also recognised by the Tudor team.

The impact of simplifying a process to make it more proportionate and accessible

When you sit face-to-face asking why and how and what the money will mean – that's huge. Organisational cultures can change if you need them to. So much of it is process-driven. Processes should work for people. (Community group)

One individual from Hartlepool commented that the voluntary sector is not an 'amorphous mass' and that different processes work in different contexts. As Hartlepool's voluntary sector is largely made up of small community-led groups, and the maximum grant size was £5,000, Tudor demonstrated their responsiveness to this context by making the application process as efficient, streamlined and accessible as possible for this community:

[Tudor] showed care for the person in front of them.

It has given me the confidence to get involved in this type of application in the future.

To be able to describe your project and communicate your passion and enthusiasm and the way it changes lives doesn't always come across in an application.

One Tudor member described how a *'conversation gives a quick way in and a richer sense of knowledge'*, and another noted how *'dynamic conversations lead to more creative, relevant grant-making and better understanding'*. Sensitivity to context seemed to be an area that the Tudor team reflected upon after this event. The 30–40 minute face-to-face, co-produced application process was felt to be an *'effective example of using Tudor's "relationship" model and expertise'*.

Being heard and reducing anxiety

They're not privileging people who can write a form, they're really hearing grassroots organisations directly.

Observing a conversation between a local group and a trustee and a staff member from Tudor, one thing that was particularly striking was the time that was carved out for the group members to be reflective about their relatively fast journey since setting up earlier this year. After the Tudor trustee commented on the value of their work and the impact they're having, one member from the group replied: *'I don't think we've had time to think about that, it's just what we do'*. Speaking with this individual a few weeks after the event, they shared how this conversation and the grant has *'jump-started'* them and enabled them to plan ahead:

Without it, we could only do small-scale future planning. We're now satisfied that we can run five days a week, training new volunteers and planning time ... and we had started running on £15 a week at the start. Tudor's belief in us made us realise we are on the right lines now. Having them believe in us is huge for our confidence. They made us feel like we're not minor peers on the stage, but equals.

Comments about being heard and respected were a central feature of the follow-up interviews and survey responses from local groups. For example, one individual talked about how *'the power of a national funder saying "yes"'* gave *'credibility'* to their work. 95% of the groups agreed with the statement that they *'felt more confident after the conversation'* and 100% felt *'uplifted after this grant-making experience'*.

It is perhaps too soon to hear about impact beyond the continuing of the activities, the initial boost in confidence and validation of their work. However, there are already suggestions that this event has helped groups to prioritise and *'rethink some things'*, and may play a part in longer-term shifts in organisational and sector-wide culture in the Hartlepool voluntary sector.

The added value for local groups beyond money

The flexible conversation and probing from experienced Grants Managers allowed the groups to gain practical advice, and 90% of the groups agreed that *'the conversation helped me to think about what we might need to do now and in the future'*:

We felt encouraged, inspired and went away thinking about what [the Tudor trustee] had said ... that we need to protect ourselves going forwards and not to get tired. This had a huge impact on us. How is this project long term and how are we long-term?

3. What questions does this raise for Tudor?

In summary, this event was an expression of Tudor's principle of building trust-based relationships with applicants and grantees, and demonstrated the value of proportionate grant-making processes. However, there is a risk in thinking that, because this process went so well and was so positively received, this model can subsequently be replicated without reflection or adaptation. Based on findings, IVAR has identified three key questions for Tudor.

What is Tudor's 'duty to care' in Hartlepool?

This process was a powerful response to the call to action in *The possible, not the perfect*. It has demonstrated that highly relational, trusting and light-touch grant-making is possible outside the context of an emergency. However, it inevitably raises questions about next steps in relation to the groups that were given grants and the wider voluntary sector in Hartlepool.

Concerns over avoiding 'parachuting in' were voiced by members of Tudor. Although considerable effort was put into setting clear and realistic expectations from the outset, including Tudor's 'short-term intentions', questions inevitably remain about the unintended consequences of a one-off injection of funding into a resource-poor setting. In reflecting on the process and its implications, the intermediary organisation described what they felt would be the responsible thing for Tudor to do now in order to continue in the spirit of the 'conversations':

It would be inspiring for [Tudor] to come again. We are an area where they'll see some of the biggest difference from their money. They could come back in 12 months' time and the groups could showcase the impact their funding has made and show Tudor 'this is what it meant for us'. Face-to-face work is better for people in Hartlepool so maybe have a celebration and a sense of not forgetting about us as a collective.

This individual also commented that these small groups may not necessarily need more funding for the next 12 months or more: *'they are small groups and only need small amounts of money, so it might not have the same impact if they do the same in a year. But maybe it will in three or four years it might, or if [Tudor] actively look for other groups here that they haven't funded'*.

What are the options for any further support for groups operating at this level in Hartlepool?

How does Tudor 'exit' a grant in their mainstream funding and is Tudor treating Hartlepool grants differently because the process has been explicitly set up as a learning experience?

What is required for this approach to grant-making?

In thinking about if and how to extend the support for groups in Hartlepool, as well as the possibility of applying this approach to small grants in other areas of the UK, it will be important to consider the following questions:

Is carrying out this approach again possible or desirable? What are the key requirements or the key steps required to do this well in another area?

What are the necessary characteristics of those areas (for example, a trusted intermediary; an identifiable need for Tudor's support; sufficient social capital to build on and make a positive contribution)?

What does this experience mean for Tudor's approach to grant-making?

By 'starting from a place of trust' in Hartlepool, there is now confidence in the idea of repeating this approach to high-trust funding elsewhere. One Grants Manager felt that this approach was a 'natural fit' for Tudor; this point was picked up in feedback from local groups who were keen to highlight the importance (and benefits) of trust:

*There is bravery around any funder investing in something when they're doing 24 hours due diligence. I understand why, for more substantial investments, they may shy away from that. But I don't see these small groups as high risk – there's honesty there, they're not making it up because they don't have to and their job's not on the line ... **It's not riskier if you're prepared to trust people.***

Questions now remain over whether and how to implement this learning across Tudor (and possibly beyond) and whether there are opportunities to adapt day-to-day grant-making processes.

Are Tudor's current systems the best expression of its commitment to placing trust at the heart of grant decision-making and grant management?

Is there a role for Tudor in encouraging other trusts to innovate in this way?

One community group commented:

Thank you for being innovative in your approach to grant-making and giving us all the opportunity to give this method a go. I hope other organisations follow your lead.

Closing Remarks

Ben Cairns

Director, Institute for Voluntary Action Research

In [The possible, not the perfect](#), published in April 2018, we described how funders supported community groups and charitable organisations working in response to three emergency events: The Manchester Arena bomb, the attacks in London Bridge and Borough Market and the Grenfell Tower fire. We found that funders stepped outside their normal practices in a range of different ways, most notably:

- Commitment to speed
- Light-touch application and monitoring
- Managing risk through relationships
- Collaborative delivery and delegated decision-making
- Flexible funding

These five points capture a particular approach to grant-making, one that is sensitive and attuned to beneficiaries. It is relational, rather than contractual; it places a premium on trust; and it suggests a kind of common endeavour, where the assets of the funder (in this case, money) are combined with the assets of grantees (their work). We concluded with a question: can such an approach only be adopted when there is a sense of moral imperative to suspend business as usual? Or might we aspire to it becoming more routine? The context for this, from the perspective of local organisations trying to serve their local communities, is that *'Every day in a community is an emergency. They don't have to have a tragedy or emergency to give money that way.'*

Since then, many funders have agreed with the sentiment. However, they also share concerns about the challenges of lighter-touch processes, including a view that they aren't *'effective'*: *'too much risk, too much uncertainty, too many unknowns'*. In the case of Tudor's coordination of emergency funds after the Grenfell Tower Fire, *'being effective'* did not mean delivering a perfect grant programme. Rather, it was about finding a way to direct money quickly and intelligently to where it was most needed – often in a complex and changing situation, where extensive consultation may be impossible. Drawing on the words of organisations in receipt of emergency funding, we can understand *'effectiveness'* in this context as meaning *'straightforward, easy, quick and trusting'*.

The story of Tudor's work in Hartlepool suggests that this notion of *'effective'* grant-making has the potential to resonate beyond the confines of emergencies. Tudor's trustees and grants staff have translated their freedom to act into less burdensome and more straightforward processes – especially appropriate for small community groups who can be disadvantaged by unnecessarily complex,

risk-averse or lengthy grant-making processes. And they have confirmed that it is possible to adopt a lighter touch to due diligence: in Hartlepool, Tudor stripped back to the bare bones.

There is much talk of funders becoming less burdensome, more straightforward and quicker in their dealings with applicants and grantees. For that to happen, funders need to be ruthlessly clear about the purpose and necessity of their processes. Tudor's work in Hartlepool wasn't rushed or haphazard – the preparation and execution were characterised by care, attention to detail and great sensitivity. But it was nimble and proportionate. And it sends a clear signal to others about what is possible when you are prepared to step outside the normal.