

Sharing power in grant-making

*Reflections from Comic
Relief's Shift the Power
Programme*

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Commissioned by:



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Introduction

Shift the Power is an intermediary funding programme run by Comic Relief. It aims to shift the power in grant-making to communities and get more funding to small grassroots organisations¹ and communities across the UK, and to trial a trust-based and 'relational' approach to devolved grant-making.

Comic Relief partnered with four intermediary funders; [Community Foundation for Northern Ireland \(CFNI\)](#), [Corra Foundation](#) in Scotland, [Wales Council for Voluntary Action \(WCVA\)](#), and [Groundwork UK](#) in England, who acted as the intermediaries between Comic Relief and local communities. The intermediary funders' role was not only to administer grants to organisations and groups at a community level, but also to identify ways in which communities could have greater control over determining where and how these grants were spent.

Launched in September 2019, the majority of the programme took place during the coronavirus pandemic. This has meant that, whilst our focus has been on adaptations made to funders' practices as a result of their participation in the programme, we acknowledge that adaptations may have been partially influenced or accelerated in response to the impact of the pandemic in communities.

This paper draws on IVAR's role as a Learning Partner, working alongside Comic Relief and the intermediary funders. IVAR acted as a sounding board – sense-making and synthesising both informal and formal data – in addition to facilitating semi-structured group conversations.

The paper reflects on what Comic Relief and the funders learnt through their participation in the *Shift the Power* programme. It is aimed at funders, in particular intermediary funders and national/local funders working with intermediaries, who are considering questions of power in grant-making: who has it, and how it can be shifted or shared.

This paper is part of a series of outputs produced from the programme, which includes a [briefing paper](#) and [blog](#) on 'lived experience', a [blog](#) on how funders can help communities deal with the pandemic, and [case studies](#) describing the detailed experiences of the intermediary funders.

¹ Grassroots organisations in the context of the *Shift the Power* programme were organisations with annual incomes below £250,000

Part one: Shift the power

Shift the Power is part of Comic Relief's wider social change strategy² and is focused on the same four thematic pillars: [Gender Justice, Safe Place to Be, Children Survive and Thrive, and Mental Health Matters](#). Its aim is to meaningfully support different types and sizes of charities doing social change work: *'from small, grassroots organisations up to national level advocacy and infrastructure organisations'*³. Intermediary funders were expected to share Comic Relief's core values in terms of inclusion and diversity and be able to provide grants across the four thematic pillars. The funders were selected based on specific criteria that included their:

- Ability to reach grassroots organisations (annual incomes below £250,000) with a good geographical spread.
- Commitment to community-led development.
- Having a participatory approach and putting people with lived experience at the heart of decision-making.
- Ability to provide other forms of support to grantees beyond grant-making, and a strong learning culture and monitoring and reporting process.

The main motivation for applying to be an intermediary funder was: *'being able to support communities and have them involved to shape the grant-making process'*, as well as having an opportunity to engage with community groups/organisations who might otherwise not receive funding.

Although working within some clear parameters (including a pre-defined approach to shifting power, and a set of themes for grants), intermediary funders spoke positively about the ability to tailor and adapt their approach in response to national and local contexts. They were able to use Comic Relief's grant to establish new grants programmes and strengthen existing ones, for example:

- CFNI established a 'new needs grant' during the pandemic, focusing on emerging community concerns: *'the new needs grant hit the nail on the head with local priorities'*.
- Groundwork UK undertook a survey to understand the needs of community groups and, based on the feedback, they increased the amount of their capacity building grants to support organisations weakened by the impact of COVID-19. These grants were typically used by organisations to shift their work online: *'This funding was focused on helping groups to get support for developing themselves internally, which sometimes gets missed out by funders'*.

² Comic Relief, 2018. [Social Change at Comic Relief](#).

³ Taken from Comic Relief's 'Terms of Reference: Learning partner for intermediary funding'

Despite these adaptations, starting with a pre-defined approach and themes restricted the scope for communities to define their own priorities, as well as leading to ambiguity about what activities could legitimately be funded. The provision of additional spaces, where communities could openly reflect on their own emerging priorities, was an approach some intermediary funders and grantees were keen to see.

Intermediary funders' experiences presented a challenge for Comic Relief and other funders trying to balance taking a structured approach with providing sufficient flexibility. For Comic Relief, a key question is: how can they provide more clarity on the change they want to see, without compromising the flexibility of intermediary funders and grantees to define specific priorities within the four themes?

Part two: Learning from Shift the Power – national funder perspective

Comic Relief was keen to understand more about and test out its approach to being a more 'relational' funder. Through working with the intermediary funding partners, three core characteristics have been identified.

Encouraging a trusting partnership approach

Intermediary funding partners felt that they were trusted and given the freedom to deliver the programme in a way that made sense for their national contexts and the emerging needs of local communities. This had a cascade effect, with the intermediaries able to have a more honest and responsive relationship with grantees.

Being responsive and approachable

Comic Relief encouraged easy dialogue and swift action. Intermediaries found them approachable, accessible, responsive and quick to communicate decisions. They felt that having a good relationship with a single point of contact throughout the programme helped, especially during the pandemic when swift decisions needed to be made due to changing priorities.

Creating spaces for learning and peer support

Having a foundation of dialogue, prior to the pandemic, helped intermediaries discuss challenges in the processes openly with Comic Relief. Spaces for learning and reflection were established in the first phase of the programme.

The flexibility modelled by Comic Relief was the first step to building a trusting partnership; it enabled intermediaries 'to innovate and test ideas even with the pandemic':

We were all in the same situation with COVID. Groups weren't able to deliver what they had planned to deliver. They came to us, in our role as funders, saying this is what we can do for the communities we work in, and this is how we can do it. The programme had the flexibility that allowed a space to say "yes" and trust them to do the right thing for their communities. This may not be seen as shifting the power, but it is. Groups were able to come to us, the funders, and share solutions and we trusted them. This is powerful and Comic Relief should pride themselves on doing this so well.

Key insights

Key insights from Comic Relief's approach to shifting the power in grant-making practice include:

- Taking a partnership approach, in a true sense.
- Developing and maintaining a high level of trust in decision-making.
- Being willing to take risks and being brave.
- Allowing for flexibility in how each intermediary interprets Comic Relief's social change strategy, according to national and local priorities.
- Establishing dual accountability between Comic Relief, intermediaries, and grantees.
- Sharing learning across the intermediaries and Comic Relief to embed good practice.
- Some aspects of reporting and storytelling can go further to shift the power.

Part three: Learning from Shift the Power – local funder perspective

Shift the Power required intermediary funders to involve local communities in their decision-making processes. Intermediary funders were encouraged to give communities autonomy to use the funds in the way they saw the best fit. Organisations or groups within communities that were applying for funding were also supported through pre-application conversations to share their ideas. Each of the intermediary funders set up lived experience grants panels and responded to feedback from the panels about how they could be improved and adapted to ensure there was a genuine shift of power from the intermediary funders to communities.

The value of the intermediary funding model approach is summarised below. Detailed accounts of each of the four funders' approaches can be found in the separately published case studies.

CFNI case study summary

CFNI reflected that they had a relatively narrow view about what lived experience and shifting the power meant for them. Initially, they created more accessible funding by shaping better systems and processes, and by listening to communities to hear and understand what's important for them and which issues need to be addressed. Over time, they have taken a more open and organic approach:

Shifting the power is about adapting our processes so that they are accessible, simple, use clear language in the application process and that we are not too bureaucratic in terms of what we ask for. Of course, due diligence, safeguarding and gate-keeping processes are in place. But we have become more trusting, flexible, and risk-taking as a funder, to get the money to organisations doing good work. Funders cannot say they are shifting the power without being flexible and including risk-taking in their grant-making.

[Read more of CFNI's case study](#)

Corra Foundation case study summary

Corra Foundation brought in community organisations who were their grantees early on as assessors and decision-makers:

We felt this would not only help bring in knowledge of the local community and their needs, tapping into their lived experience. It would also be beneficial for them to know how grants are made and what we look for in applications, which would build capacity.

Community-led grant-making is 'very much a new departure for Corra Foundation', which makes it difficult for them to assess the extent to which it has been successful. However, early indications are that 'overall it has worked really well', with community organisations feeling that they have been listened to, and that the grants have responded well to the needs of communities:

People who work here understand the policies and its implications better. They also know what is needed and how to deliver it. So, the whole approach by Corra has been about empowering communities.

The experience in a way was uplifting. When I offered my ideas and thoughts they were welcomed by others. It was a deeply gratifying process. Deciding what needs to happen and to fund an organisation or not was scary yet fun.

[Read more of Corra Foundation's case study](#)

Groundwork UK case study summary

Groundwork UK felt that, through their local reach into networks of grassroots organisations, they had been successful in acting as an intermediary to help fund local initiatives in England. This included helping Comic Relief funding reach those organisations that were some of the first to respond to the immediate and emerging needs of some of the most vulnerable groups when the pandemic hit:

We helped to build their [panel members from grassroots organisations] capacity to know about grant-making and they made the right decisions for their local communities and areas, drawing from their wealth of knowledge, expertise and work in the various themes across the years. Knowing that the panels together had so much experience in the sector, we are sure that the best decisions have been made for the grants, as the power of the local panels is in that local knowledge.

[Read more of Groundwork UK's case study](#)

WCVA case study summary

WCVA felt that as a result of setting up regional panels representing local communities, lived experience and professional expertise, different decisions were made because it was not a national body making them. The panel approach was very successful in focusing funding to local priorities and genuinely engaging people with lived experience:

It was 100% clear to see that small grants with a community panel could be more reflective of the community and that we were getting funding to those that need it. More use of lived experience has also been really positive, and panel meetings have gone ahead locally which has worked well too. Accessibility for people with lived experience has worked very well.

[Read more of WCVA's case study](#)

Part four: Learning from Shift the Power – grantee perspective

Most grantees reflected that it was the personal relationships with their intermediary funder that they had really appreciated, especially a more 'human' approach:

They helped us get everything together, there was a long list and it seemed complicated, but with their help and support we got there – it was a totally different experience to any other funder.

Without the intermediary funders, grantees felt they would not have felt confident applying directly to Comic Relief, but now feel like they have a more direct relationship:

We are aware [the funding] is from Comic Relief, but it's nice to have it coming from a local funder. Comic Relief would not have been aware of us and before they seemed a little daunting. It has opened things up.

The intermediaries were able to move towards a more trusting approach to grant-making, experienced by grantees as being properly listened to and challenged, with more of a focus on the difference made through their work and future needs, rather than just on financial capability.

Part five: What to think about as a funder wanting to share power

Learning from the *Shift the Power* programme suggests that:

1. You need to start by understanding where the power lies.

Funders benefit from reflecting on the relationships between themselves and those they fund and assessing how equal or unequal they are.

2. Sharing is a key step to starting to shift the power.

For example, by funders sharing power with local intermediaries, or others embedded in a community who are better placed to make decisions about where and to whom funding should go.

3. You need to consider who has a stake in decisions about priorities and grant-making.

For example, how might you involve a specific community (local or issue-specific) in your grants process, how early in your process can you involve them, and what would you need to do or know to achieve this?

4. Learning, reflection and discussion needs to be continuous

Discussing how things are working, as well as who is or isn't being heard and involved, to adapt each iteration of a funding programme.

Other considerations

Based on IVAR's wider work, the following are some additional factors to take into consideration when thinking about different approaches to sharing power:

What is your appetite for risk?

For example, how much risk are you willing to take to shift the power back into communities? See IVAR's [framework on thinking about risk](#).

The process

Consider how to make your processes more accessible. Relatively simple adaptations – reducing the length and complexity of funding application questions and/or enabling funding applications to be submitted in a range of formats – can make a real difference to applicants.

Better reporting

Encourage better and less onerous reporting mechanisms by being clear about what you really need to know and providing feedback on the content and use of reports. See IVAR's [Covid-19: How funders can ease reporting requirements](#).

What is fixed and unfixed?

Create a common understanding on what elements of your process can evolve and change, or be adapted, and what cannot.

Conclusion

Comic Relief's *Shift the Power* programme was pioneering: taking steps toward a more flexible and responsive approach to grant-making and seeking ways to ensure funding reaches grassroots organisations and communities, during a period of unexpected and extreme need.

During the pandemic, community organisations have shown what can be achieved when relationships between funders and grantees are more open and trusting, making a strong case for grant makers to 'do things differently'.

The challenge, now, will be for funders to sustain and develop the progress already made, to ensure their processes support communities to weather ongoing and future storms. This will require continuous learning, action, and adaptation on the part of funders – building on their relationships with grantees and with each other – as well as a genuine exploration of how power is shared and shifted to communities and organisations with on-the-ground expertise.

While internal reflection and adaptation is an important starting point, funders will also need to be advocates – participating in wider conversations, joining communities of practice, and demonstrating the steps they are taking – to inspire lasting and far-reaching change.

Read more about the open and trusting grant-making initiative here:

<https://www.ivar.org.uk/flexible-funders/>