

Sharing lessons for government: An Open & Trusting approach can work

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Corra Foundation is a Scottish grant-making charity that focuses on strengthening and amplifying people's voices and their power to make change. They give grants to charities and grassroots groups as well as managing funds on behalf of others, including the Scottish Government. They have used the learning from their own Open and Trusting Grant-making journey to encourage partners to take small actions towards big change. Elaine Wilson, Head of Learning and Development, shared with us their recent lessons and reflections.



Why we take an Open & Trusting approach

At Corra we are a committed learning organisation, this means we use insights and learning that will benefit the people and communities we support. This includes improving how we continually develop open and trusting within our own practices to support communities, applicants, and grant holders.

During and after the pandemic, we reflected on what was important to us as a funder. It prompted us to ask ourselves whether all our requirements were relevant. We went from a funder that managed circa 200 applications a year, to 5,000, in the space of three months. This was directly due to supporting emergency grant funding. Responding to this demand helped us better understand the diversity of communities and how funding processes could often feel like a barrier. Learning from this experience has enabled us to reach more of the communities, particularly organisations that were led by people with lived expertise, but also embed streamline processes for small grassroots groups. We wanted to amplify the voice, power, and agency of communities, and increasing our accessibility and reach was an effective way to do that.

The Open and Trusting approach dovetailed with the changes that we were already striving to implement. The approach encouraged us to reflect on how we could: make our materials easier to understand, be more proportionate with reporting requirements, offer more flexibility in funding, be open and upfront with people about our expectations, and be clear about what to expect from us as a funder. We were able to take some of these lessons and implement them with our grant-making practice.

“We’ve always highlighted that Open and Trusting is a journey, and we can’t commit to all eight principles all the time, but we regularly stop, reflect, and review how far we have to go. What are the next steps? Are there other things that we need to do? Can we continue to improve? We use Open and Trusting as a tool to think about improvement.”

Insights from working with public sector partners

With any partnership, and particularly when you are delivering funds under contract, all parties need to understand the scope of work – it’s important to find the best approach to deliver the fund. Our starting point when engaging with any partner including public sector partners, is to reflect on the Open and Trusting approach, including how to build in principles that will increase quality and accessibility for the people we aim to support through these partnerships. We always ask ourselves: how can we make this fund the best possible thing?

Thinking about risk differently

A good example comes from 2021/22, when we managed the Winter Support fund on behalf of the Scottish Government. This fund took a cash-first approach, where local community groups distributed cash to people in their area who were experiencing hardship from fuel and food poverty. This fund demonstrated Open and Trusting principles, by showing a willingness to be proportionate about risk. This model, and the associated ways of working, shaped future funding on behalf of partners, including the [Household Hardship Fund](#), which also took a more progressive approach to risk.

Making reporting work better

Traditionally, many of the funds we manage on behalf of public sector partners require quarterly reporting. Feedback from funded organisations highlights that quarterly reporting does not allow for quality insights and is very time consuming. Having established relationships with our public sector partners, we were able to share these reflections. In some of the funds, we suggested alternative reporting structures like moving from quarterly to bi-annual reporting, which were then implemented. This is a small but significant step and is beneficial to everyone.

Cross-party support is an enabler

We know from so much of our work that to deliver policy often needs long-term support and flexibility. Adopting Open and Trusting Grant-making principles can help promote the delivery of better policy solutions. Internally, Corra has a good understanding of the policy context. This was a key factor in our development of the [Promise Partnership Fund](#). Following the [Independent Care Review](#), there was cross-party support in the Scottish Parliament for [The Promise](#), including involvement of people with care experience in service design. This enabled us to develop a programme that brought lived expertise into shaping the criteria and decision-making process of the fund, resulting in increased flexibility in how the funds could be used by successful grant holders.

Sharing learning and lessons to influence change

In Scotland, there are increasing conversations about Open and Trusting principles amongst independent and public sector funders. At a recent Scottish Leaders Forum event on the findings from Scotland's recovery from COVID-19, we shared our reflections on how we adapted as a funder to the pandemic. This included using our data better, targeting specific groups for funding, streamlining our application materials, offering more flexible funding, and increasing our appetite for risk, which includes funding unconstituted groups.

Some of the challenges

I am not surprised, when reading previous blogs and reports from IVAR's work, by how easy it is to feel comfort in old practices. This is particularly apparent when having to manage greater demand on funds and/or responding to difficulties that are experienced by grantholders. Government and other public bodies face similar dilemmas and are increasingly facing significant pressures which include managing financial challenges. Sometimes when you are faced with those challenges, the simplest option is to revert back or add in structures, making it appear easier to manage processes. But this is at odds with an Open and Trusting approach to grant-making.

At Corra, there is a constant thread connected to each Open and Trusting principle, enabling us to maintain our pledge. We create the space to listen, reflect, review, adapt and strengthen our actions in support of the eight Open and Trusting principles. At times, this work might not appear to have major significance – it can feel quite small and varies from informal steps to more formal processes. The key is sharing our journey and clarifying the rationale for the steps we take.

“You don’t have to commit to all eight principles at once and have everything up and done. There are some practical steps that we could work together on and think about.”

Advice for public agencies

Sharing examples is important, but it is also important to ask yourself the right questions regarding the Open and Trusting approach. We ask ourselves questions such as these to improve our practices:

- Who needs to help us think about some of these practices that will improve grant-making, such as being more proportionate, and offering more flexibility in funding?
- What are the collective actions we agree with partners that incorporate Open and Trusting principles in our programmes?
- Do we need or use all the information in our tenders, or our application forms?
- Is there a way that we can join something up?
- Where are quick wins that allow us to be progressive, and which opportunities will take a bit longer?
- How does it benefit both the people that we seek to serve, and us as an organisation too?
- What are the next steps to move forward?

We are not complacent about our commitment to Open and Trusting practices. We acknowledge that making some change is better than none. We learn from others and continue to look at our practice, aiming to make it a better experience for applicants and grant holders. Feedback from them is telling us that the more we share our learning between peers and sectors, the more we help to promote and support change.

Corra regularly reports on its Open and Trusting commitments and improvements they are making to their grant-making practices [Open and Trusting Grant Making Report \(corra.scot\)](https://corra.scot.gov.uk/open-and-trusting-grant-making-report).