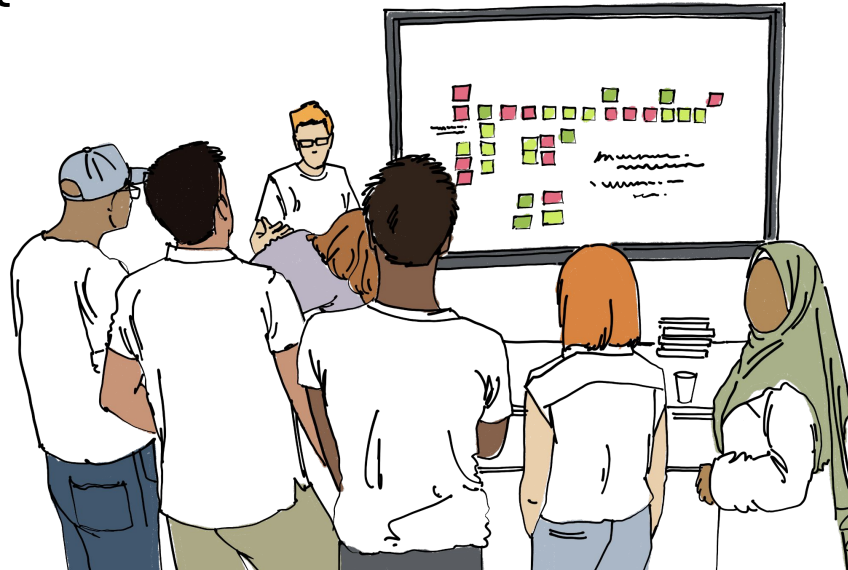
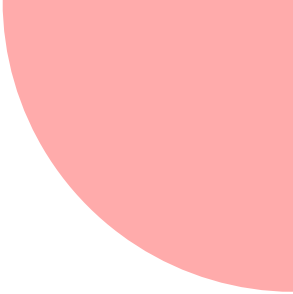
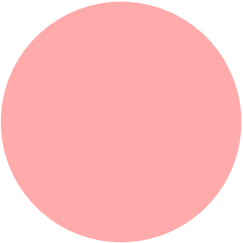


From Bid Writing to Setting Up: Reflections on the first year of the Volunteering Cities grant

Interim Report
14th Dec 2023





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- Purpose of this Interim Report
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Introduction

At Neighbourly Lab we are the Learning Partner on Spirit of 2012's Volunteering Cities Funding Programme.

We are working with 4 grantees who bid for the UK City of Culture 2025 title, including Great Yarmouth, Bradford, Medway and Conwy. Whilst Bradford won the title, the others did not, but given their strong bids to transform volunteering in their cities, they were awarded funding from Spirit of 2012 to build their volunteer infrastructure.

Our role is to explore the benefits of this funding and to understand challenges that take place. We do this through learning workshops bringing all grantees together, grantee depths and reviewing grantee progress reports.

From those insights we have developed an Interim Report that captures the key benefits and challenges as shared by grantees from their first year.



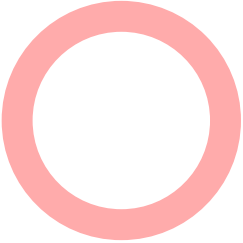
This report explores two key themes

The below two key themes have consistently emerged through grantee shareback:

- 1. The transition from bid team to project team and what this means for delivery**
- 2. Setting up volunteer infrastructure - putting plans into action (volunteers, external partners and internal management)**

We will explore these in the following section. Please note: under separate cover is the Impact Gallery and the Learning Partnership Day write up which support this piece.





Overview of key findings from the first year





Our findings

Throughout the first year in our ongoing conversations and workshops with grantees we have observed two key themes, when it comes to the transition from bid writing to delivery, and setting up volunteer infrastructure.

These are themes that collectively each grantee has faced. Each has implications for progress in developing their volunteering infrastructure and therefore adherence to the original bid.

1.

The transition from the bid writing team to the delivery team can be challenging to execute and stick to plans.

2.

Tendency for grantees to focus on outputs not outcomes when setting up volunteering infrastructure.



1.

The transition from the bid writing team to the delivery team

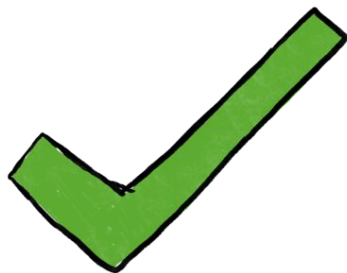
The Volunteering Cities bid was often written by a different team than the team responsible for executing and delivering the bid. This transition from one group of people to another presented a number of challenges for those in role now, charged with executing plans.

- Difficulties in reflecting the ambitions of a bid writing team that isn't necessarily involved in the activity and transferring that to teams who will be on the ground delivering.
- Bid writing team were perceived as overly ambitious in what could be achieved, particularly in terms of achieving volunteer numbers and meaningful partnerships, according to the experiences of in place delivery teams.
- Lack of clear handover in the key elements of the programme and how it should be delivered.



1.

Recommendation: The transition from the bid writing team to the delivery team



- Commitment from the bid writing team in the proposal to support the transition to delivering the proposal.
- Include a wider range of people in the bid writing process including those who will be delivering the programme.
- Contingency on the grantmakers to ensure that this transition time is baked into the proposal. It will only be awarded if they can see this handover and proposal will work in reality.



2.

Tendency for grantees to focus on outputs not outcomes

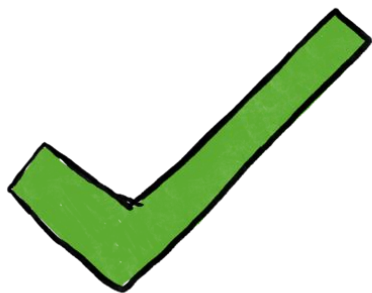
Collectively grantees have often focused on the intended outputs of the programme, finding it harder to hold in mind the bigger ambitions of the grant. They are not necessarily thinking about the outcomes and how to pivot to achieve them and stay within the original bid. We have seen this through:

- Grantees focusing on numbers and what was exactly written in the bid and getting stuck when what they are doing isn't working, rather than looking at the overall outcomes and thinking of different ways to achieve this. This results in them reducing numbers of people signing up rather trying new ways of reaching people or finding solutions.
- This approach means grantees can be working hard in sticking to the output plan, and not creating time to reflect on the bigger picture. They need support with this.



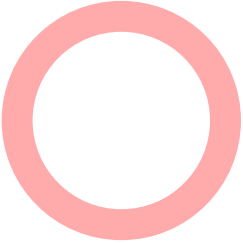
2.

Recommendation: Tendency for grantees to focus on outputs not outcomes



- As projects are focused on creating more positive outcomes for the community and for volunteer infrastructure as a whole- the focus needs to be on outcomes, and the outputs could be revisited if they are not achievable or relevant to current context.
- Grantees need to be encouraged to carry out a more reflective practice. Reflection sessions could be baked into project timelines to help project ambitions stay on track, and pivot as necessary, to ensure that the grant is a success.





Findings in more detail



Timescales

In this first year of the grant, each of the grantees have tried to achieve a variety of deliverables. These include: **funding and funding arrangements, hiring staff, building internal partnerships and external relationships, finding volunteer opportunities, setting up volunteer platforms, comms, marketing and volunteer infrastructure.**

All grantees have been able to achieve some elements of each of these deliverables. However, they have all reported challenges in being able to meet all their first year objectives with unrealistic timings contained within the bid being a key barrier to success. Timescales also seem to underpin whether or not other deliverables have been achieved so far.

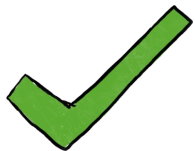




Challenges – Timescales

- We heard from grantees that the bids felt **overly ambitious**, concerning what was achievable in the first year.
- For some, this was frustrating and disappointing – as they felt that **despite working hard, they had not managed to achieve close to the ambitions of the first year plan**
- In particular, bids were written without taking into account the timeframe for **hiring delivery team members**. In reality, many staff were not in post for until Quarter 2 of the bid, meaning there was much catching up to do. According to grantees, timeframes were unrealistic in terms of what was possible amongst individual staff members and for developing the necessary team work.





Recommendations - Timescales

For funders:

- **Provide information** to grantees when developing the bid on what is realistic, encouraging them to focus on what is possible for getting the project started effectively.
- **Provide time and guidance** on what to prioritise and plan for in the first few months, including sharing knowhow from previous grantees e.g. job descriptions, interview questions etc. So they are not 'reinventing the wheel'.

For Grantees/bid writing teams:

- **Baking in realistic expectations** into the bid, so as to prevent early challenges from the delivery team, management and the funder. Setting people up for success should be a priority, not trying to get the bid 'over the line'.
- **Book in time for team reflection** to allow time to reflect on what is working well/less well so that they can pivot and keep themselves accountable.



Funding

Initial receipt of funding is exciting and gives cause for bid teams to celebrate on what they have achieved.

This excitement can be taken over by a sense of anxiety over what they can achieve, where the gaps are and how the project can be sustainable in the long term.

For some grantees, it felt like budgets were unrealistic and designed to win the funding, rather than deliver the project effectively.





Challenges – Funding

- Many grantees have reflected that they would benefit from **additional funding or support** to ensure that their programme can be sustainable in the long term. This can sometimes lead to them not doing as much as needed to get projects off the ground, so there is an **imbalance** between thinking to the **future of funding** and current **delivery outcomes**. This can lead to confusion and according to some, burnout as there is not enough resource to deliver and fundraise.
- In addition some grantees that are responsible for delivery do not have access to the budget, this is held by another partner and funding can be hard to release, leaving grantees unable to move forward with plans.





Recommendations - Funding

For funders:

- Supporting grantees with **budget planning** and providing links to **other sources of funding** if necessary.

For Grantees:

- Clear **demarcations of money** for activities and the outcomes they want to achieve.
- Demarcation of money to account for **inflation and pay rises** for staff.
- Ensuring that concerns for the long term plans of the project do not **prevent** grantees from **getting started**.



Volunteer sign up into action

Many grantees report some success in recruiting volunteers who would benefit from taking part in the programme. They have also been able to recruit volunteers from across a diverse range of communities according to their aims.

As part of the programme grantees have used different outreach strategies (e.g. via text, posters, social media campaigns and local events) to reach different audiences and to ensure all activities are inclusive.

However, many grantees have faced challenges in transferring volunteer recruitment into volunteer activity. They have also struggled with balancing out recruiting for diversity and recruiting volunteers more generally.





Challenges – Volunteer sign up into action

- A key barriers has been **finding the right opportunities** to suit volunteering needs especially since there are limited volunteering opportunities already available within communities, which prevents instances of active volunteers in the programme.
- Grantees have seen this as a direct problem of partnerships and opportunity, as well as the type of volunteering experience they aim to provide. Much of the bids were focused on meaningful impact to the individual volunteers, but this is currently at **odds with volunteering opportunities**, causing grantees to rethink their outputs.
- Another barrier preventing volunteer activity is is not finding out what is **motivating** people to want to volunteer, so that they can find activities that suit the volunteer motivations.
- Grantees have also struggled with **putting effective systems in place** to help with signing up volunteers.





Recommendations - Volunteer sign up into action

For Grantees:

- Taking time to find out ways the volunteers might be **motivated to engage** - do they want to work their way up the volunteer ladder, what is motivating them (skills, belonging, want to have fun)
- Grantees would benefit from **sharing resources** and not reinventing the wheel. Including sharing how to sign up volunteers, broker relationships with partners and find diverse volunteer offerings.

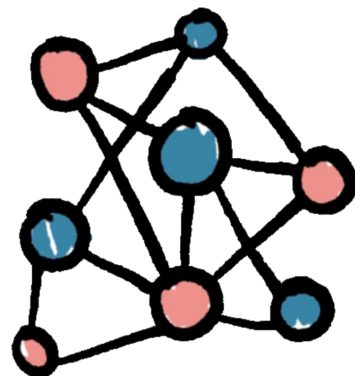


External Partnerships

Grantees report that they have spent a lot of time and effort trying to form external relationships with volunteering and cultural organisations within their communities, often with positive effects.

Success has been most effective when there was a pre-existing relationship with external partners – trust and opportunity being the key ingredients for success.

However, some grantees have been stumped at the slowness of the partnerships taking shape and creating opportunities. Some have found the lack of interest from external partners in being involved in the programme an unexpected challenge.





Challenges – External Partnerships

- Often external potential partners do not have the **time or capacity** to engage in supporting the project. They are trying to deliver against their own objectives and can't see that the benefits of engagement outweigh the additional workload.
- There are also reported hesitancies from potential partners to engage, as they are concerned about **lack of sustainability** beyond the funding cycle and they may be left with more than they can manage.
- We also heard that there is an element of **competition and gatekeeping of volunteers**. So hesitancies to engage can be based around fear of losing their volunteers **rather than seeing benefits of engaging**.





Recommendations - External Partnerships

For Grantees:

- **Taking time to meet** potential external partners face to face and seeking them out actively by going to them, attending their events and finding creative ways of working together.
- Emphasise intentions around **longer term project sustainability** and that you are finding pathways to secure that.
- Emphasise that grantees have a **lot to offer** external partners, like potential volunteers, physical space, financial incentives and training opportunities.
- Whilst also acknowledging that some potential partners don't want to engage and that isn't a failure if grantees have **proactively** made those efforts.



Managing internal team dynamics

Grantee teams are often made up of different partners from various different sectors from across Local Authorities, the voluntary sector, and culture and arts sector. This provides a brilliant opportunity for cross sectoral working with each team member providing different skills and experiences.

However, it can lead to challenges with team members having different objectives and ways of working. There can also be funding challenges in this relationship.





Challenges – Managing internal team dynamics

- Although in many instances the **mixed make up of the grantee teams is beneficial**. There were instances where it presented as an issue.
- With different sectors have **different ways of working and operating** that can lead to friction on how to do things and who is leading or supporting.
- As the partners come from different sectors and organisations they may not be **physically located** in the same **workspace**, which can cause communication issues as well as perceptions that people are working more or less hard.
- At their various organisations they can have different priorities, which can lead to **varying degrees of effort** being put into the project.
- Challenges with **budget ownership** in some locations, can cause hold ups in delivery.



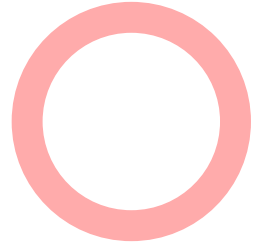


Recommendations - Managing internal team dynamics

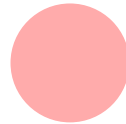
For Grantees:

- **Reflecting back** on the ways in which they have been working as a team to see if this is still working, how can the team pivot so that everyone is benefiting.
- If effort is not being split evenly because of different priorities is there a possibility to **rescope** who does what to ensure that efforts are being fairly distributed based on time and cost.
- Ensuring that the project team has **regular check ins**, preferably in person to reflect on their activities, reflect on successes and challenges and what can be done to rectify any difficulties.
- Opportunities to re-think the **Budget Managers**, this is important otherwise it can cause further delays.





Conclusions



Conclusions from this first year

- Ultimately throughout this year grantees have made progress in developing their volunteering infrastructure, but they have also experienced challenges which means they have not met all year one outcomes.
- To a greater or lesser extent they have hired staff, developed external relationships, recruited some volunteers and encouraged people who are new to volunteering, from more diverse backgrounds, to get involved.

A key observation on what would ultimately benefit grantees in the future would be to:

- Find time to reflect internally as a team to look at their achievement so far, think about challenges and brainstorm on what they could change to overcome any key challenges.
- As this project is focused on creating more positive outcomes for the community and for volunteer infrastructure - the focus should be on those outcomes not necessarily the outputs, so pivoting can be necessary in order for the grant to be a success.



Thank you

Marnie Freeman: Marnie@neighbourlylab.com

Emma Bowkett: Emma@neighbourlylab.com

