Collaboration in Grant Making

Thought Paper: The Role of Collaboration in The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust's Funding Programmes

||| THE ARMED FORCES
COVENANT FUND TRUST

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Collaboration is seen as an effective mechanism to get a wider range of organisations to engage with the funding process. The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust (AFCT) has been encouraging collaboration both formally and informally through its funding programmes. AFCT has observed that collaboration brings more comprehensive levels of support for beneficiaries across its programmes. Collaboration between charities and nonprofits tends to have five key features, which were also observed or recorded as being present in the collaboration facilitated by AFCT:

1. Leadership engagement;
2. Issue / cause-based collaboration is better or more effective than funding-based collaboration;
3. Relationship building leading to trust building is crucial for effective collaboration;
4. Planning is important; and
5. All partners are equal.

AFCT's evaluation-based evidence also suggests that beneficiaries and organisations value a collaborative approach to delivering services and interventions. Inevitably more questions are raised as a result of this thought paper and AFCT wants to understand each of these in relation to its mission and future programme design.

1. Should collaboration / partnership working be a core funding tool in a formal way?
2. Should collaboration only ever be 'encouraged' rather than set as a condition of grant?
3. When is collaboration not a good idea?
4. Is collaboration always about peer mentoring?
5. How can collaboration / partnership working be encouraged at a local level amongst micro-organisations (without larger household names getting involved)?
6. How is collaboration / partnership working sustainable without funding attached to it?
7. Should AFCT establish a community of practice to promote greater collaboration and shared development of smaller organisations?
8. Should the six Strategic Partners, or a wider group of Armed Forces charities, establish a community of practice or learning network, to promote greater collaboration and shared development of smaller organisations?

Why discuss collaboration now?

The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust (AFCT) has been encouraging collaboration amongst its grantees and believes that collaboration enhances not only the grant-making process, but also improves outcomes for grantees and their beneficiaries.

Promoting collaboration does lead to even more questions being raised and AFCT believes that the time is right to produce a Thought Paper on collaboration in grant-making and between grantees in order to clarify its thoughts on the issue and set out questions arising from collaboration that might, in the future, warrant greater study.

Background

AFCT delivers funding programmes that provide positive social impact to Armed Forces communities in the UK, in support of the Armed Forces Covenant. Alongside its own funding programme worth £10m per year, AFCT also delivers funding programmes on behalf of HM Government.

AFCT has seen collaboration develop most especially amongst those organisations that are part of its Strategic Pathway initiative and for those grantees participating in the Positive Pathways funding programme, where collaboration is a condition of grant.

Partnership and collaborative projects have also been encouraged less formally in other funding programmes such as the Families in Stress programme and the Aged Veterans Fund.

Over time AFCT has been building up its evidence base using project and programme evaluations, which it is publishing on its website. Alongside this the Trust has developed a learning strategy, where learning acts as a virtuous circle and learning from previous programmes is factored into the design of future programmes and programme thinking. Now AFCT wants to take its learning one step further and ensure a continuous learning approach amongst its grantees by providing thought leadership and sharing the learning and knowledge created through its grant-making experiences.

Positive Pathways and **Strategic Pathways** is part of the **Veteran's Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund**.

Six larger organisations make up the Strategic Partners in the Strategic Pathways programme. These organisations provide support and guidance to grantees of the Positive Pathways programme, connecting their projects to wider networks, supporting reporting to AFCT's Impact Hub and providing training opportunities as appropriate.

The Strategic Partners also collaborate together on initiatives.

Collaboration in grant making - and how AFCT is doing it

Common amongst funders is a desire to encourage a wider range of organisations to participate in their funding programmes, this was echoed in AFCT's own consultation on its Positive Pathways programme[i]. Promoting or facilitating collaboration is seen as a way to encourage more organisations to engage with funders. Although 'collaboration' can mean different things to different funders including closer programmatic coordination amongst grantees and development of stronger organisations[ii]. Collaboration is also used as a peer-support / mentoring tool to develop effectiveness in the organisations collaborating, just as AFCT is doing through its Strategic Pathways and Positive Pathways programmes.

Funders have often assumed different roles to encourage collaboration including, but not always, providing funding, networking opportunities, facilitated spaces for joint working, etc.[iii] AFCT promoted collaboration through a workshop day where key organisations were brought together to focus on joint working and partnerships. This event encouraged participants to understand that while each had a clear mission, none could deliver a whole programme on their own. AFCT has also made collaboration a condition of grant in its Positive Pathways programme and actively encourages the larger organisations involved in the Strategic Pathways programme to collaborate with each other as much as with the smaller organisations that they are mentoring. The AFCT sees its role as a driver of collaboration between Armed Forces organisations and between Armed Forces organisations and other specialist organisations as key to developing a more collaborative, partnership-oriented way of working, but does acknowledge that it takes time to shift the culture towards collaboration and joint working.

Organisations that want to or intend to go into a collaborative arrangement with another organisation need to ask themselves the following questions[iv]:
1. What change amongst our beneficiaries do we hope to see from participating in a collaborative effort and how central is that to our mission?
2. To what extent are we set up to collaborate?
3. How much do we value collaboration as a strategy to achieve our goals?
4. What skills and resources can we bring to our potential collaborators that will add value?

Once organisations have answered these questions and determined that collaboration is right for them, they should be aware of the 4 key stages in collaboration[v]:
A. **Building relationships:** connect early based on a shared issue, invest in planning time, build personal relationships, get to know the other stakeholders in the communities that you serve;
B. **Establishing a team:** identify your partners based on the aims and scope of the collaboration and ensure the aims and scope match each organisation's mission. Identify the gaps and find out who's missing;
C. **Defining roles:** make sure you have clear definitions of the roles and responsibilities not only for each collaborating organisation, but also the people working or volunteering within each organisation; and
D. **Communicating to build trust:** communicate regularly, rely on mutual trust to resolve conflict and use an external facilitator to take the tough decisions.

Collaboration and peer mentoring as collaboration can be effective tools, especially where collaborating organisations can work with each other as equal partners regardless of the size of each organisation. Participating in designed training, research and policy work[vi] where grantees have issues in common[vii]. Programme design can help here, just as AFCT developed the linked programmes of Positive Pathways and Strategic Pathways to engage organisations that might not have always felt they could or should participate in a programme.

Through the Strategic Pathway programme, AFCT has enabled Cobseo to collate and agree shared resources developed by the Strategic Pathway participants, that can be made available to other AFCT grantees as training materials to improve their effectiveness. These materials are used in the peer mentoring relationships set up under Positive Pathways. The peer mentoring relationships also support wider evidence that grantee organisations can learn better in peer groups where they have control of the process and some funders have observed that these peer-based relationships can morph into many forms. These relationships are often more beneficial when grantees can apply what they have learned to organisational practice[viii], such as those organisations participating in Positive Pathways have been able to do.

Collaboration can morph into many forms:
- Funder-design convening
- Grantee-requested Community of Practice
- Co-designed approach (funder and grantees)
- A group that consultants help to shape

Additionally, collaboration between specialist organisations from two different sectors can also improve outcomes for beneficiaries, as AFCT found in its Families in Stress programme that meant services could get into the bases and work alongside the serving personnel, but still be seen as confidential and 'non-military'.   Leadership was essential in ensuring these collaborative approaches worked on the ground: base commanders and organisational leaders needed to ensure that their relationships were well developed so that the services on offer were trusted by the military personnel[ix].

Better outreach and sustainability were also observed in the evaluation of the Aged Veterans Fund, which found that when collaboration, partnership and project promotion were strong, there were better and more comprehensive levels of person-centred care and skills exchanges for beneficiaries. This approach also improved the reach of the Aged Veterans Fund and added value to the partner organisations. For example, collaborative approaches led to increased knowledge amongst staff about dementia, mental health first aid with regards to the needs of veterans[x].

Where to next for Collaboration?

From the research conducted for this paper and set out above, there appear to be five key features of collaboration that are beneficial to building successful collaborations, all of which have been observed to a greater or lesser degree in AFCT's work:

1. **Leadership engagement:** leaders at all levels of the organisation have to endorse and support collaboration as a positive tool to improve organisational performance and deliver more effective results for beneficiaries;
2. **Issue/cause-based collaboration is better or more effective than funding-based collaboration:** collaborations are more likely to be sustainable if the organisations participating in the collaboration see its inherent value to their missions. This might include instances where organisations that would be competitors have received funding with a condition to collaborate as the funding 'argument' has been removed by the grant-making mechanism;
3. **Relationship building leading to trust building is crucial for effective collaboration:** Trust is the key feature of collaboration and to build trust requires meaningful relationships;
4. **Planning is important:** taking time to plan and think about what collaboration will mean for partners, their roles, the shared governance arrangements, etc is crucial; and

5. All partners are equal: a mechanism to ensure parity between partners of different size, experience (usually linked to governance arrangements or funding levels)

AFCT has facilitated collaboration in order to deliver increased positive impact for the Armed Forces communities in the UK. It has done so both formally and informally, through partnership working and peer mentoring. AFCT's evaluation-based evidence also suggests that beneficiaries and organisations value a collaborative approach to delivering services and interventions.

Inevitably more questions are raised as a result of this paper and AFCT is intent on understand each of these in relation to its mission and future programme design.

1. Should collaboration / partnership working be a core funding tool in a formal way?
2. Should collaboration only ever be 'encouraged' rather than set as a condition of grant?
3. When is collaboration not a good idea?
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5. How can collaboration / partnership working be encouraged at a local level amongst micro-organisations (without larger household names getting involved)?
6. How is collaboration / partnership working sustainable without funding?
7. Should AFCT establish a community of practice to promote greater collaboration and shared development of smaller organisations?
8. Should the six Strategic Partners, or a wider group of Armed Forces charities, establish a community of practice or learning network, to promote greater collaboration and shared development of smaller organisations?

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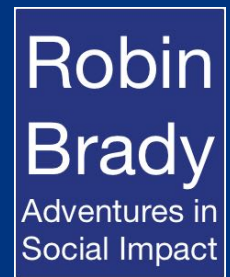
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