

Response to Big Lottery Fund research into value of funding advice

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Thank you for sharing this research. I think it is a really important piece of work, identifying some of the impact of the work of people with funding advice responsibilities and offering interesting challenges for how we increase our understanding their role in supporting civil society. The following comments are my own views, informed by discussions with colleagues in East Midlands Funding Advice Network (www.emfan.org.uk).

The first thing to note is that this research is limited in scope and comes from a particular perspective: its approach is surely influenced by the reasonable wish to understand the value of funding advice to Big Lottery Fund. An assessment of the full impact of funding advice work would look at the overall benefit of funding advisors' work for their service users/customers. This research doesn't look at advice about other funders' grants, or support around non-grant VCS income, or the impact of advice on organisational development or management capacity, or the sustainability of groups, sectors or civil society as a whole. Anyone either thrilled or in despair at the findings of this research should remind themselves of its limitations.

But clearly there is valuable learning in the report. I hope BIG will respond to suggestions from FAs about improving materials, briefings, presentations and websites. FAs in turn should recognise that there is a substantial minority of groups unaware of their service and do more to engage with them. I imagine that more detailed analysis of the data would generate more lessons. It would certainly be good to have an analysis of what sort of groups aren't aware of funding advice services so we can target marketing efforts at them. One East Midlands' funding advice signposting service (www.fanoogle.org.uk) is generating learning about how to promote funding advice to new service users and such data would be useful for us.

I am troubled by the statement, "This research found no clear evidence that FA support influences the quality of applications we receive, though there was some evidence that FA support led to us receiving fewer inappropriate Awards for All applications." (section 5, paragraph 4). This looks like hair splitting or over-willingness to conclude that advice on applications isn't valuable. The statement's juxtaposition with paragraphs about what BIG has done in the past to support funding advisors worries me. Are you using this confused evidence as justification for reducing support for funding advice services? If you are then please don't.

Worst case scenario from the evidence is that the value of FAs in advising on grant applications is in providing an effective first line filter that saves time and money for BIG and for groups by preventing applications that won't succeed, which sounds good to me. I very strongly suspect though that funding advisors do make a positive difference when they work with groups to improve their applications and the research methodology needs to be looked at again. Without access to the raw data or information about the research methodology it is difficult to comment further.

If it is true that funding advice doesn't improve applications to Reaching Communities and Awards for All then that is a disappointment that FAs and upper tier infrastructure like One East Midlands ought to respond to, so it would be great for us all to have access to the data from the research to see whether we can unpick what's going on. It would also be great to see how this compares with the value of advice on other funders' applications, perhaps something that can come from One East Midlands' work on the Funding Monitor website in the next couple of years. We should also take account of changes in the capacity of funding advice workers: with ongoing reductions in resources for funding advice, much of the advice given to improve applications might be cursory rather than in depth.

What value we place on advice to improve an application and what value we place on advice to do something other than apply are interesting questions. Funding advisors could argue that the latter form of advice is the most important part of their work. The 'something other than apply' could be any of a whole range of things, from applying to a different funder through reprioritising the fundraising strategy to refocusing aims or addressing weaknesses in governance. After all, many "funding advisors" aren't that at all, they are development workers who take a holistic approach to supporting groups.

I would suggest that the key responses to this research are those based on the finding that a proportion of applicants don't know that advice is available and the finding that over a third don't read the guidance or access the website material. We can help with the former: our website fanoogle.org.uk signposts groups to East Midlands FAs and helps to access groups who wouldn't otherwise know about the support on offer. The latter finding is a real concern at a time when BIG is shifting more of its application processes to online-

only and clearly BIG needs to recognise the risks involved and make every effort to improve how you present online materials. On the thorny debate about the value of funding advice I'd say that this research is only a start. I hope that One East Midlands will be able to help by contributing analysis from our funding monitoring website (www.fundingmonitor.org.uk) and that BIG will go further with its own research – we really need to drill down into this data to get value from it.

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