

## EVIDENCE REVIEW: WHAT WORKS IN BUILDING FRONTLINE VCSO' CAPABILITIES

The Third Sector Research Centre, at the University of Birmingham, in partnership with the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University, has been commissioned by the Big Lottery Fund to review existing evidence of 'what works' in building front line voluntary and community sector organisations' (and partnerships) capabilities to deliver outcomes to end users.

### What are the aims of the research?

The Big Lottery Fund is currently developing its Building Capabilities for Impact and Legacy (Building Capabilities) initiative. Building Capabilities has the potential to be a significant step-change in the way in which support for front line voluntary organisations (FLOs) is organised. It suggests a move towards a 'demand-led' emphasis which brings the priorities of front line organisations to the fore front. The underlying principle is that providing greater choice and control for FLOs over access to support will lead to more effective interventions to develop their skills and confidence and, ultimately, to improved outcomes for beneficiaries. Before developing the agenda any further, it is an important time to assess what we know from existing evidence about what works in building front line voluntary sector organisations' capabilities to deliver outcomes to end-users more effectively and sustainably.

In order to inform the future development of the Building Capabilities initiative, the Big Lottery Fund has commissioned a formative study to explore three core questions:

1. What works in building front line voluntary sector organisations' (and partnerships') capabilities to deliver outcomes to end-users, how, when, why and in what context.
2. The requirements for, and potential of, a marketised approach for capability-building, including an understanding of the shape of the emerging market, and potential gaps in provision including those for specialist groups.
3. The lessons that can be distilled for the Big Lottery Fund, other funders, policy makers and market participants, from these new understandings.

Within these three core questions, the Big Lottery Fund has identified nine hypotheses that the study will test:

1. *In Defence of Infrastructure (Voice + Service)* - support to FLOs is more advantageous to them when delivered by supply-side organisations which combine support service provision and representation of the VCS in their work.
2. *Choice in a Market* - FLOs and VCS partnerships make informed choices about the types of support they may need, and, about the sources of support available.
3. *Choosing leads to Better Outcomes* - Giving frontline VCS groups and partnerships choice and control over the services that they receive leads to better skilled and more confident FLOs, with enhanced outcomes for beneficiaries
4. *Choosing with Help* - Diagnosis leads to better quality support (whether for FLOs or VCS partnerships) compared to support sought without an initial diagnostic process.
5. *In What Circumstances and Why* - There are factors which are critical to sustainably embedding these skills and confidence in FLOs and VCS partnerships, which lead to benefits for end-users.
6. *Targeting by Sector or Locality* - There are segments of the VCS and types of communities (whether geographic or of interest) which are most in need of capability-building support.

7. *Market Failure* - There are some critical support services for VCS groups (or certain parts of the VCS) which cannot be provided through the market.
8. *Funder Support* - Funding capability-building helps funders to achieve their mission by drawing in better quality applications and empowering hard to reach communities.
9. *Provider Capacity* - The market is able to respond to the demand that will arise as grant holders are supplied with in-grant funding to seek capability-building support (whether this funding is applied on a targeted or universal basis) and as the Fund develops pre-grant area-based capability-building initiatives.

### What does the study involve?

The study involves three key elements

1. **Learning review** – a series of participatory workshops consisting of different stakeholder groups.
2. **Evidence review** – a rapid evidence assessment of published and grey literature of relevance to the key questions at the heart of the study. This is the main part of the study.
3. **Market review** – a preliminary examination of the demand for and supply of building capabilities support activities, through secondary analysis of existing surveys and a new online survey of support providers.

### How can you get involved?

There are a number of ways in which you can get involved in the study:

1. Share your views and details of any evidence you are aware of with relevance to the main research question or any of the nine hypotheses with your colleagues at today's Local Infrastructure Symposium. June Gomes, from One East Midlands, has kindly agreed to collate your views and feed them back to us.
2. Email us directly with any evidence that you are aware of that might be able to address the study questions, to test the hypotheses. Please do get in touch by contacting Angela Ellis Paine at [a.ellispace@tsrc.ac.uk](mailto:a.ellispace@tsrc.ac.uk)
3. We are undertaking an online survey of individuals and organisations that provide support to frontline voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations. The survey has two main aims: to develop an understanding of types of providers currently providing non-financial support to frontline organisations; and to explore the extent and nature of non-financial support currently being provided to frontline organisations, including how it is funded or paid for. It should take between 10-20 minutes depending on the amount of support that you have provided. The deadline for responses is 17th April 2014. You can access the survey through the following web address:  
<https://extra.shu.ac.uk/survey/BuildingCapabilitiesSurvey/>

### Who do I contact to find out more?

The project is being led by Dr Rob Macmillan. The team includes Angela Ellis Paine and Helen Kara (TSRC) and Peter Wells, Chris Dayson and Elizabeth Sanderson (CRESR).

For more information please contact: Angela Ellis Paine, Research Fellow, [a.ellispace@tsrc.ac.uk](mailto:a.ellispace@tsrc.ac.uk), 0121 414 5461, Third Sector Research Centre, Park House, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT

Or contact: Samantha Magne, Policy and Learning Manager, Big Lottery Fund  
[samantha.magne@biglotteryfund.org.uk](mailto:samantha.magne@biglotteryfund.org.uk) 01392 849717

The Third Sector Research Centre is an interdisciplinary research centre, based at the University of Birmingham. For further information, please see [www.tsrc.ac.uk](http://www.tsrc.ac.uk).