

Propel Learning Network Day: Summary Note

On Thursday 29th June 2023, organisations funded by Propel¹ came together along with funders and equity partners to share and discuss their collective ambitions for the programme, alongside more informal networking. The day was facilitated by the Institute for Voluntary Action Research² (IVAR) who are the learning partner to Propel – working with funders, equity partners and funded organisations to facilitate regular reflection and learning opportunities.

The day was split into two parts:

- The morning was for funded organisations (those in receipt of Propel grants) to discuss their collective ambitions for Propel and begin the discussion about ‘what it will take’ to support this work.
- In the afternoon, funders³ and equity partners⁴ joined the meeting to hear funded organisations’ experiences of Propel to date (the application process; grants; reporting expectations, etc.) and build on the discussion about what more Propel could do to support the work going forwards.

This note summarises the day’s discussions under the following headings:

- What underpins the work funded through Propel
- What it will take to enable change
- Next steps

This summary note has been produced by IVAR. If you would like to see the detailed write-ups of the flipcharts and plenary discussions, please email katie@ivar.org.uk.

What underpins the work being funded through Propel

The following summarises what we heard from funded organisations about their ambitions for the work, what they hope to achieve and the way of working – e.g. experimental, placing a premium on opportunities to learn – that they hope Propel will enable. We use the term ‘collective ambitions’ to describe the things which funded organisations agreed they were hoping to do through Propel.

Collective ambitions

Organisations shared what they want to achieve through the work being funded by Propel and what they hope to get from being part of the programme. This included:

¹ Propel is a long-term funding collaboration that will, over the next ten years, give the capital’s civil society and communities the flexibility, trust and capacity to make long-term, systemic change in London. Find out more at: <https://londonpropel.org.uk/>

² <https://londonpropel.org.uk/>

³ City Bridge Trust, Mercers, The National Lottery Community Fund, London Legal Support Trust

⁴ HEAR, Inclusion London, LGBT+ Consortium, The Ubele Foundation, Women’s Resource Centre

- **Opportunities to pilot new approaches/models** and learn from them.
- **Tangible outcomes** for the groups and communities that organisations support.
- **Placing lived experience ‘front and centre’⁵**. Many people involved in leading Propel-funded work have lived experience. There were suggestions about additional opportunities to involve grassroots groups in Propel’s decision-making processes, e.g. young people’s involvement in the application assessments.
- **Providing a platform** to raise awareness, engagement with, and support for issues, *‘Informing advocacy and forming a new narrative on age-old problems.’*
- **Expanding networks**, making new or strengthening existing connections with organisations that work in a similar field or geography, building peer support and identifying opportunities for partnership and collaboration.
- **Evidence**. Making the case for the need to support certain groups; helping people understand the broader impact of the work; exploring what’s missing in terms of available support. Propel is seen as a platform that could share organisational stories and successes. In relation to the Propel model, building an evidence base about what works and what aspects of the approaches applied could be replicated by funder collaborations outside of London.
- **Opportunities to influence funding practice**. The hope is that organisations and sectors will be empowered to *‘challenge what we’re entitled to’*; new funding routes/opportunities are developed for under-funded sectors; and to level the playing field for smaller, minority-led charities.

Language

Propel uses the term ‘systemic change’ to frame the collective work being funded, articulating this as, ‘engaging with the whole system around an issue, tackling root causes not just symptoms, building a shared understanding of how systems can change.’

In recognition of the fact that organisations may have their own terms or concepts that frame the work that they do, we asked, ‘Is there a useful language that people relate to that can hold the work together?’ Whilst some felt that a *‘universal’* language and terminologies could be useful, others felt strongly that language should remain flexible and fluid to reflect and remain accessible to the many different groups involved.

Some of the other points made in relation to language were:

- Words and terms that organisations hope to see associated with Propel include: *growth, development, movement, transformation, disruption, responsive, emergence, influence change, connect, user-led, bottom-up approach, story-telling, leadership, humility, bold.*
- Be careful around taking on and using language/terms without thinking about the impact it could have and/or without understanding what it represents.
- Avoid referring to individuals as ‘service users.’
- Less use of jargon.
- Honest language, e.g. to describe the challenges.
- British Sign Language: talking about what ‘language’ can fail to recognise BSL.

⁵ Italicised text indicates direct quotes from participants.

What will it take to enable change?

The following summarises the insights shared throughout the day by funded organisations and funders about what it will take to enable change. It is split into two sections:

- **A different approach to funding:** the funding and funding practices needed to support the work to succeed.
- **Funding to change:** the ways in which Propel can support this work beyond individual grants.

A different approach to funding

The work funded through Propel will not succeed without funding and funding practices that support it. There is an opportunity through Propel for the funders to work together and build more consistent good practice. This might mean being willing to start from scratch and design new, equity-led, approaches to funding services and support in London.

Feedback from funded organisations on the application and grants payment process for Propel was varied:

- Many found it a straightforward and positive experience.
- Others had experienced delayed grant payments, cuts to their proposed budgets and a rushed application process.

This led to a constructive discussion (see below) on what consistent, good funding practice might look like for Propel. The onus for this is on funders. However, the chances of getting it right will be greater if they work in collaboration with funded organisations (that wish to be involved in the conversation).

What's already in place to build on...

- **Spaces for dialogue.** Between funded organisations and funders, to influence positive shifts in funder practices; to co-produce funding solutions; to cultivate partnership, rather than 'giver-taker' relationships: *'Having a number of grantees in the room leads to more honest conversations i.e. when we are all together, rather than when we have 1-2-1 conversations'*.
- **Propel principles.** A vision of change and a collective energy for change.
- **Long-term, multi-year funding** and the significant scale of investment in initiatives across London.
- **A focus on equity-led organisations** and those with lived experience, recognising them as the experts in the problems at hand.
- **A talent pool that funders can look to engage with beyond Propel**, i.e. recruiting representatives from Propel organisations and/or the communities they work with onto funder Boards.

What more can be done...

- **Open conversations about the 10-year vision:** with funded organisations bringing their experiences and funders openly sharing their interests and motivations. Understanding from funders *why* these themes and *what* the issues are. *'We are on a journey and the partnership needs to be equal'*. This could include bringing additional funded organisations onto the Propel Strategy Group.
- **Long-term grants** that are in line with funding applied for. Not asking budgets to be cut. Core and unrestricted funding wherever possible. Be clear about what the likelihood of continuation funding is after round one grants, give this information early (not at the end of a grant), and make timely decisions. Co-design these options with grantees. Consider whether the current cohort can be involved in making decisions on the next. Signpost organisations to other funding sources.
- **A consistent experience** across the funders, rather than organisations going through different application and reporting processes with different funders.
- **Flexibility, patience and trust.** Allow projects to get going and understand that change is not always linear. Take the time to listen, get to know and understand each other and the complexities of the work. Provide the flexibility that's needed to deliver what works best, trusting funded organisations to get on with the work at hand and allowing for failure.
- **Light-touch, co-designed reporting.** Co-design a simple and shared process with funded organisations. Make the paperwork and language straightforward. Make reporting relational, e.g. use learning days as a way of reporting on progress collectively, rather than one to one with a grant manager and/or discuss different reporting options, e.g. in person visit rather than a written report.
- **Pay for organisations to participate in learning and networking activities**, e.g. attending learning days, establishing independent peer groups, etc.
- **Remove accessibility barriers.** Put time in to understand and collaborate on solutions to access barriers faced by specific groups. For example, barriers to applications for BSL-led organisations and those for whom English is a second language.
- **Identify where there are investment gaps in the sector** that act as a barrier. Deliberately look out for insights into this through the Propel work. For example, challenges resourcing and/or recruiting paid staff; and gaps in sector leadership, e.g. *'a pool of deaf leaders'*.
- **Use funder platforms to advocate for this work.** For example, championing the importance of funding and support for advocacy and campaigning work that is linked to frontline delivery: *'Funders, you are in a position to stand up for us and advocate for equity needs and advice services.'*

Funding change

With the first cohort of funded organisations in place, there is an opportunity to begin to build a greater collective, in-depth understanding of the areas of work supported through Propel – support for young people; community spaces; advice services –and explore the potential for change through collaboration.

Organisations spoke about the fact that *'we are in this journey together, as allies for equity and equality, to create transformation in the system'*. Whilst many organisations are

already working on collective change efforts through Propel, many also have an interest in forming new potential partnerships and collaborations with other Propel partners.

Funded organisations and funders talked about the ways in which Propel can support this work beyond individual grants.

What's already in place to build on...

- **Opportunities to network and learn** from other organisations working in similar fields/geographies/communities.
- **Opportunities for 'experimentation' and 'safety to fail'**. With the space to develop an idea and not feel afraid to report on the things that don't work.
- **A multi-disciplinary, pan-London group of organisations** who can bring a collective, in-depth picture of the issues and solutions.

What more can be done...

- **Create infrastructure so funded organisations can connect and collaborate independently**. For example, an online platform/directory of funded organisations, searchable by field/geography/type, etc.
- **Targeted learning opportunities with space for challenge**. Where organisations are grouped according to field/geography/themes/topics of interest. Creating opportunities for difficult conversations and learning from what hasn't worked as well as what has. This could include convening funded organisations around specific issues and providing some funding for them to take a coordinated approach. For example, collating data on how much time advice workers spend chasing or challenging the Department for Work and Pensions.
- **Support for wellbeing**, e.g. wellbeing grants. *'We just keep doing the work and forget about our own wellbeing.'*
- **Consider 'who is not in the room'** but is a core part of the change work and how to involve them. For example, *'infrastructure agencies.'*

In addition to practical measures Propel can take to support this work, there was also discussion about the behaviours it would be important to instil and maintain, linked to the Propel principles (see Appendix One):

- **The freedom and flexibility to be disruptive**. In the work being funded and in wider Propel discussions about what change is needed and how to bring it about.
- **Allow for failure and make space to discuss when things go wrong**: *'Failure is also success: we all learn'*.
- **Funders using their platform and networks to influence change**: *'Using the power we have as funders strategically to target systems change work that needs to happen, working alongside our grantees, supporting you to share your work widely with our networks.'*

Next steps

The Learning Day was the first opportunity for funded organisations, funders and equity partners to come together to discuss the collective ambitions for change in the context of the Propel programme and what needs to happen to support this work.

This summary document will be shared with everyone who attended the learning day. London Funders will take forward some agreed actions (summarised below). IVAR will also be discussing with London Funders the plans for further learning activity, including scope for co-design with funded organisations.

The urgency around some of the issues surfaced, such as delays to grant payments, is recognised and these are being addressed by the relevant funders.

In terms of other points raised under 'what more can be done', these are some of the actions that are already underway or proposed, to be further explored with funded organisations:

- **Long-term grants/post round one:** Funders are actively considering how current grantees could progress onto longer-term grants and have met with a group of funded organisations to discuss this. This will be immediately relevant to organisations with one-year grants and the aim is to have an offer and process in place by early autumn.
- **Reporting:** The majority of funders are working on a single reporting format, with data collected both via the form and through dialogue. Funders and a group of funded organisations have met to test ideas and hope to confirm plans in early autumn. This is in addition to separate conversations that some funders may be having with organisations about how to jointly agree on a reporting process with their funder.
- **A platform to connect organisations with each other:** London Funders is exploring tech options (currently looking at Slack as the preferred option).
- **A resource bank of tools for change** for funded organisations – developed and shared by them.
- **Review of feedback from grantees about learning activities and spaces:** IVAR will be taking on board the feedback from the Learning Day about learning interests and preferences, along with feedback we're gathering from additional conversations with funded organisations. We'll then use this to inform the programme-led learning activities over the next year. Alongside this, London Funders is looking at the issue of funding for engagement in learning activities (including support for independent peer groups/networking). London Funders is also reviewing Propel communications, looking at ways to enable partners to share failures and learning and celebrate change where it happens.

Thank you for reading. We look forward to continuing to work with you. At IVAR, our role as a learning partner is to:

- Surface the collective ambitions for change in the context of the Propel programme.

- Understand how Propel – through grants; funder practices; and additional support – can support this work.
- Create spaces for peer learning.
- Provide support to organisations to develop their monitoring, evaluation and learning processes, knowledge and skills.

What this looks like in practice may develop and change over the time we work with you, as we evolve our understanding of what will be most useful.

Appendix One: Propel Principles

Systemic – engaging with the whole system around an issue, tackling root causes not just symptoms, building a shared understanding of how systems can change.

Bold – experimenting and taking risks together, influencing wider ways of working.

Flexible – recognising that the future is uncertain, that funders and grantees are on a learning journey together, trusting grantees to respond to changing challenges and opportunities.

Sharing power – recognising that everyone has something to contribute (money, knowledge, networks and reach), investing in people’s capacity to co-design, embedding participation in decision-making from the start, building trust and confidence.

Equitable – unlearning old ways of working, biases, and lenses on the world, ensuring that design, process and decision-making are inclusive and take account of the diversity of the sector and of communities.

Non-partisan – recognizing both civic and democratic leadership, combining the convening power of politicians with wider participation and voice.

Long term – investing beyond political and institutional cycles, providing stability for civil society partners and seeking to make transformational change.

Accountable – jointly accountable to each other and to the communities we serve.