

Introduction

The Big Lottery Fund's mission is 'to bring real improvements to communities and the lives of people most in need'. We will use our funding expertise and influence to help people and communities by supporting both proven and new approaches that will have a measurable impact.

As an intelligent funder, what we do will be based on our learning and that of others, evidence and experience of what is needed. Research and learning activities have a key role in helping us to achieve this mission

The Big Lottery Fund (BIG) has a new Strategic Framework in place for 2009-15. Following a period of public consultation, BIG has made a commitment to being a champion of disadvantaged communities and people, particularly those undergoing transitions or experiencing isolation. Using an intelligent funding approach, we will deliver programmes of funding and other activities that achieve sustainable change in these areas by 2015.

As we develop a fresh strategic vision for the Big Lottery Fund as a whole, we envisage a role for evaluation, research and learning that informs every aspect of BIG's work. Through effective generation and sharing of evidence and knowledge, we will ensure that BIG's impact is widespread, effective and sustained.

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We start the period of the new Research and Learning Strategy with a strong reputation and track record. BIG is an experienced and recognised commissioner of evaluation and research. Over the last thirteen years, BIG (and its predecessor organisations) has built up a reputation among other funders, the third sector and the wider evaluation and research community for the range, variety and quality of its evaluation and research work. We marked 2007 with a major evaluation conference and publication of 'Answering BIG questions: impacts and lessons from our evaluation and research', a synthesis of more than a hundred research studies. We have worked hard to make our findings accessible and ensure each study is followed through with a dissemination and learning strategy that helps to ensure transferable lessons are shared with those whose work they can inform.

“BIG will have a more dynamic and influential role in the external world”

There is much potential to build upon this strong foundation, and to do more. We want to shift the balance from retrospective evaluations of programmes to more forward-looking and influential research that informs policy and practice within BIG and beyond. We want to be a learning organisation, placing more emphasis on knowledge exchange – equipping Board, Committee members and staff with lessons and findings that allow them to do their jobs more effectively. We want to contribute to better understanding of impact and results across the voluntary and community sector by supporting our grantees to measure and reflect on their own performance. We want to build on the evidence and research generated by us and by others to ensure BIG's interventions and funding decisions are appropriately focused and achieve the intended impact.

The purpose of Research and Learning at BIG is to gather and share evidence and encourage learning to inform decision-making, policy and practice.

Our vision

- ▶ The Research and Learning team will generate robust and timely evidence that informs funding approaches and policies within BIG and supports the achievement of our organisational mission.
- ▶ We will play a key role in establishing a new culture of learning by facilitating reflection and knowledge sharing within BIG and among grantees. Our learning will be informed by rigorous and analytical enquiry, thoughtful appraisal of effects, and awareness of what others have done before.
- ▶ We aim to maximise the impact of our work by ensuring that findings draw upon external research and are in turn influential among external policy-makers and the wider research community.
- ▶ Our dissemination of findings will be imaginative and proactive. We will communicate in a variety of formats, making the most of digital technology to inform a wide audience. Research findings will be strategically disseminated to key decision-makers within BIG and beyond, and presented in a format that meets audience needs.

Where we'll be in 2015

By 2015, the Research and Learning team will have generated a comprehensive programme of evaluation and research that supports key organisational needs of intelligence-gathering, analysis of impact and shared learning.

Research and learning activity will be happening across all of BIG's teams, regions and countries. This activity will be supporting BIG to deliver its mission.

By 2015, there will be a well-established culture of organisational learning at BIG that means people are using evidence and learning in a sophisticated way to inform their work and decision-making. Given the breadth of BIG's vision, this will mean that the Research and Learning team are managing an expanded and up-to-date evidence base and that there are excellent mechanisms in place for both accessing and exchanging information and evidence across BIG's UK teams.

BIG will have a more dynamic and influential role in the external world. Through the use of high-quality research and evaluation, we will be influencing and informing key stakeholders, so that their policies or funding decisions benefit from our accumulated evidence. We will be more closely engaged with the policy-making and research of others so that our subsequent interventions are well grounded in existing evidence and experience. Where we support innovative approaches through our funding, we will undertake rigorous analysis to understand their effectiveness and potential for wider replication.

By 2015, we will be playing our role in delivering BIG's mission by having enabled a better and shared organisational understanding of what works to support those most in need. Across BIG we will be using evidence from research and other sources to ensure that our funding is appropriately targeted and effective in delivering real change for people and communities.



What we'll do

We will capture and use research and learning from different sources, namely:

- expert external research
- research commissioned by the Research and Learning team
- learning from BIG's programmes of work
- research and evidence captured or commissioned by BIG's country and regional teams
- research and learning from our grantholders, including from bodies awarded research grants through BIG's research grants programme.

Drawing these different sources together, the Research and Learning strategy will be delivered in two broad areas: intelligence gathering and impact measurement. A third area of influencing, communicating and learning will ensure that findings and evidence are embedded and turned into action.

Intelligence gathering

By this, we mean the process of ensuring we have up to date, relevant and robust information from internal and external sources to inform our work. This is important to ensure we are investing our money in the best way in pursuit of BIG's mission. Activities will include:

- intelligence-gathering from external sources
- future scanning to identify emerging issues and needs
- synthesising research from other organisations to use within BIG
- generating evidence of effective approaches from our own experience, both of how to fund and what to fund
- using our wider project and programme learning and research to inform our future planning
- using local knowledge and statistics to build an accurate picture of the context, needs and gaps to help focus BIG's funding interventions.

We will take a thematic approach to our work, bringing together external research with evidence from across our programmes of funding to inform our understanding of the world and future interventions. Intelligence gathering is critical to ensuring our programmes of funding are informed by excellent

contextual knowledge, that they are well designed and targeted, purposeful and appropriate. It also serves to support our assessment of grants and to underpin our decision-making.

Intelligence gathering

In line with our well-established practice, we will use statistics to help us understand the characteristics of a geographical area and help us to identify areas of particular need. We have undertaken a pilot study in the East Midlands region to map our grants against deprivation statistics at ward level. It showed us that our Reaching Communities programme in the region does indeed appear to be targeting those in need. We plan to build on this work, widening its scope, incorporating other indicators of social exclusion, and using the latest grants data.

Impact measurement

By 'impact measurement', we mean exploring and analysing the effect of BIG's work. This could include assessing the delivery of our funding programmes or contributing to research that seeks to understand the longer-term effect of work in a particular area. This is important because we want to be able to shape and deliver our funding programmes to deliver maximum benefit, or to inform a shared understanding of the types of interventions that work in a particular setting. Activities will include:

- supporting performance management by improving the quality and analysis of data on applicants, grantholders and their progress towards meeting project outcomes
- judging how well our programmes meet their outcomes
- evaluating how projects and programmes adapt to meet changing circumstances over time
- using our wider research spending to understand effects and effective practice
- assessing the difference brought about by our funding to individuals, communities or geographic areas

- understanding wider and longer-term effects beyond project outcomes and award timescales
- evaluating innovative pilot or demonstration projects that may lend themselves to replication or scaling up.

Impact measurement

We are interested in exploring what happens to sustain outcomes or benefits after our funding period ends. Following an initial scoping study that investigated different methodologies and that built on our research study 'Early indications of sustainability', we plan to test what aspects of projects are sustained longer term across a range of programmes. How far can these be influenced by programme design or funder action, and how far by grantees' actions in planning, positioning or working with others?

Influencing, communicating and learning

This area of work will include developing ways of making evidence, research and learning accessible and relevant to a wide range of audiences. There is no point in generating research and evidence that is not used. We see take-up of lessons as critical not only to the successful delivery of the Research and Learning strategy but also to furthering BIG's desire to be an effective learning organisation. Our work here will encompass sharing and exchanging findings with internal and external stakeholders and grantees. Learning underpins the work of all staff within the organisation. While the Research and Learning team may take responsibility for the formal end of the learning spectrum, we have a critical role in fostering more informal cross-departmental learning and making lessons accessible. This ties in closely with BIG's forthcoming Organisational Learning Strategy, which will be developed over the course of 2009-10. Meanwhile, the Research and Learning work under this heading will include:

- equipping Board, Committee members and staff with lessons and findings that enable them to make policy and decisions more effectively
- sharing learning from BIG-led research and other organisations' research to support our

organisational learning and planning

- communicating findings externally to inform other funders and policy-makers in the way they fund or make policy
- adding to the evidence base within the social policy arena so that practitioners are able to learn from the experience of BIG-funded projects
- using research evidence from our funding to support BIG's role as a facilitator, broker and commentator
- building the capacity of our grantees and applicants to reflect on their own practice, share and use good practice, and build their own skills in measurement, self-evaluation and research usage
- promoting the good practice associated with being an intelligent funder.

We also plan to review the support and materials which BIG makes available to applicants and grantees, and consider effective ways of encouraging peer learning among this important group of stakeholders.

“By 2015, there will be a well-established culture of organisational learning at BIG”

Influencing, communicating and learning

We have launched a seminar series to bring external stakeholders together to debate key issues and learning arising from our work and linking them to wider policy agendas. The first of these (held in October 2008) raised some provocative questions about the difficulties of implementing community empowerment. Policy-makers and researchers met and made links with each other, while we were able to provide specific and relevant examples from programmes like Fair Share and the Scottish Land Fund. The event generated wider interest – from commentators who have picked up useful examples to further discussions with government ministers and officials. Other events in the seminar series have included informal learning and holistic approaches to addressing drug misuse.

We have identified nine key characteristics for research and learning activity that will guide our work at BIG, whether funded through our central Lottery budget or in connection with our non-Lottery research. Research and learning activity will happen in several places within BIG.

Our activity will be:

Robust: it will stand up to scrutiny and adhere to good social research practice

Strategic: it will have a clear aim and audience and meet a key organisational need

Timely: it will recognise policy and organisational timescales, providing interim outputs and real time analysis; impact studies will necessarily occur over longer durations

Evidential: it will use the rich material of the Big Lottery Fund's diverse experience, employing a range of methods and approaches to understand complex effects, local contexts and beneficiaries' lives

Cumulative: it will take account of other research done, building on this and on the Big Lottery Fund's own experience to add cumulatively to what is known

Challenging: it will explore what has been difficult as well as what has been successful and will not be afraid to ask challenging questions

Accessible: it will be communicated to audiences in practical and useful forms, with the opportunity for dialogue and reflection

Affordable: it will represent value for money and fit within the approved budget for research and learning.

Transferable: taking a thematic approach, it will have relevance beyond the programme of work where it began.

Research and Learning Team

The Research and Learning team, based in London and Birmingham, will have primary responsibility for delivering this strategy. The team will continue to have a UK remit, working to share evidence and learning across the four UK countries. In recognition of the size of grant spending in England, the team will continue to take responsibility for England-specific research and evaluation work. The team consists of professionally skilled research managers, and includes two new Learning Adviser posts.

Countries and Regions

Research may be commissioned in other parts of the organisation. For instance, countries and regions may have specific policy or accountability needs that are best met by locally commissioned research. To ensure that such work complements other activities and is of high quality, the Research and Learning team will have a reviewing and oversight role.

Cross-functional working

Some key areas of work will be delivered by cross-functional working. For example, the Heads of Research and Learning and the Head of Organisational Development will jointly lead a key cross-organisational initiative on Learning and Knowledge. Other work is likely to include intelligent funding work and policy development (including using evidence and learning to inform the development of new funding programmes). The Research and Learning team will also support organisational performance through the corporate planning process. This will include the measurement of organisational impact and the use of aggregated data to inform decisions (including work on business process re-engineering and the new corporate data management system).

Collaboration with other research funders and providers

In seeking to be more externally engaged, it is likely that we will undertake pieces of research with other bodies. We recognise the value of collaboration with other research funders and providers and will increase our joint ventures. We will also synthesise and make accessible others' research, including that undertaken by our own grantholders. This is likely to involve extending the potential for wider dissemination of research funded through our Research grants programme, which supports research undertaken by VCS organisations with academics.

Throughout our research and learning activities we will engage with others to make maximum use of knowledge, wherever it sits. We will use expert research providers and advisers to help us deliver rigorous research studies; we will engage with project managers and beneficiaries to ensure their voices are heard through our work; we will use BIG staff's expertise, helping them to reflect on their engagement with projects. And we will work with policy-makers, opinion-formers and funders to achieve maximum leverage and influence with the evidence we gather in order to achieve positive change.

The core annual budget remains steady (at £1.16 million for 2008/9). However, we start this new strategy with a sizeable body of ongoing evaluation and research commitments, including multi-year evaluations of the Big Lottery Fund programmes or themes.

In addition to this central budget, the Big Lottery Fund spends a far greater amount on research or associated activities. Such activity is funded from policy, communications and country budgets. It appears in our grant funding, notably the Research Grants Programme. It appears most significantly across the board in our encouragement to grantholders to spend up to 10% of their grant budget on monitoring and evaluation. Put together, this amounts to substantial research spending which we intend to make the most of.



This strategy is subject to approval by the Big Lottery Fund's Board in May 2009. Delivery of the strategy is overseen by a Board subgroup that meets once every four months. Based on this strategy, a detailed action plan is developed each year, and is available on request. Research studies are prioritised against the following criteria: alignment with BIG's Strategic Plan, Corporate Plan, Evaluation, Research and Learning Strategy and intelligent funding principles, strategic or organisational importance, political salience, policy timeliness, evidence gaps, potential for testing innovation, value for money and wider learning potential.

The Research and Learning team maintains responsibility for BIG's research standards and research quality control, observing established social research and ethical standards. Research commissions adhere to BIG's procurement rules. In addition, our Research and Learning Strategy takes into account equalities implications, and provides one of the accountability routes for ensuring that we are compliant with our legal obligations, observant of good practice in the way Lottery money is spent, and, critically, monitoring our progress in addressing inequalities through our funding.

This strategic approach to research and learning at the Big Lottery Fund will underpin the delivery of our mission to bring real improvements to communities and the lives of people most in need.

Evidence will be robust, relevant and influential. We will inform the development of policy (both internally and externally) and work to ensure that a culture of learning and enquiry is fostered among staff and grant holders.

In implementing this strategy, we recognise that a continuing culture change is taking place within BIG and in terms of our relationship with the outside world. Effective communication of our plan of work and its emerging results is critical in order that BIG's research and learning activity is both effective and influential.

