

Designing and running a community building



Reflections from our grant holders



Communities Buildings –reflections from our grant holders

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Phone 0845 4 10 20 30

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Introduction

This booklet summarises the learning gathered during nine Big Lottery Fund grant holder engagement events held in 2010. The events brought together many of the Community Building projects to share their experiences and talk through the common challenges and issues that affected their ability to achieve successful outcomes. This document is a record of the issues and challenges faced by the projects, and some methods by which they can be minimised or overcome. The document is not a step-by-step guide to delivering a successful capital project but a way of sharing learning to help you to avoid similar problems.

It is important to remember that this resource should be seen as a guide only, as it is a record of views expressed to BIG by a number of our grant holders. Whether anything here is useful to you, and whether you choose to use it or not, will depend entirely on the needs of your community building project and your local community. However we do strongly encourage you to take note of as much learning, experience and feedback as possible before initiating a capital building project.

The learning is grouped under seven major headings, with an opening section looking at what people would do differently if they were starting now.

We would like to thank all those who attended and contributed to the events for their time, enthusiasm and insights.



What would you do differently?

Attendees at each event were asked to answer the question “What three things would they do differently on their project?” The responses covered a wide range of issues but the following represent the main points raised;

The project team

Form a small focused project team with the appropriate range of skills and experience required to deliver a capital project.

Take time to develop the project team as a team, clearly highlighting early on where potential skill gaps exist. Developing a capital project is very different from a revenue project and requires very different skills. Making sure that all skills are covered provides a better chance of the project succeeding.

Appoint representatives of the user groups onto the broader management committee of the project. This ensures the community are fully involved in the process and that the finished building meets the needs of the various users.

If funding allows, employ a professional project manager. They will have experienced all of the potential problems that could arise but will also plan to try and ensure they do not arise in the first place.

Legal aspects

Employ the appropriate legal expertise early on to resolve issues before they get out-of-hand and increase costs.

Establish that you own the property and land well in advance of any application for funding. Discovering this further down the road will not only slow the process down but has the potential to add significant costs to the project and could threaten it going ahead at all.

Check that any lease or local planning regulations will allow for the project to go ahead. It is important that the lease permits the capital work to take place and that it will not jeopardise security of tenure.

Consider planning and environmental issues which could cause delays and increase costs.

Funding

Build up some reserves pre-application to help cover the initial start-up costs of the project. This is particularly important if you are unable to find professionals (architects, surveyors, structural engineers etc) to work at risk during the initial stages before funding is secured.

If development grants are available, make use of them. These funds can really help you take your initial ideas and plans to a more detailed stage ready for funding decisions to be made.

Make sure other financial commitments from funders are secure from the start. Uncertainty around securing funding will always be a problem but try to ensure that other funders are committed before any work begins. Failure to do so may threaten the success of the project and may make you liable for repaying any grants you've already received.

Allow for a contingency over and above projected costs. This is normally a requirement and is vital as costs often exceed initial estimates due to unforeseen problems.

Try and secure business sponsorship early on for service delivery on completion. Private sponsorship of ongoing services will help with the overall sustainability of the project.

Understanding funders

Research funders in advance to prevent time-consuming applications to inappropriate funding programmes.

Make sure that you fully understand all of the funders and the funding programmes involved in the project. This will help you better monitor against the various outcomes/outputs required by the funders.

Consider whether applying for the full amount from one funder (if possible) is better than spreading the cost across a number of funders. Timing funds from various funders can be complex and could lead to the failure of the project. If you can secure the full funding from one source it removes this problem.

Make sure you request the true cost of the project from the outset. Trying to artificially reduce the cost of your project to secure funding will lead to significant problems later in the process, placing the project in severe jeopardy.

Look at the various deadlines of funders to make sure they can be matched up. If they cannot match up it will consume your time and place the project in jeopardy.

Working with the professionals

Take time to secure the most appropriate professionals from the start. There are professionals who have specific experience with charitable and not-for-profit organisations.

Tender for all professional services to ensure best fit with the project and best value for money.

Work closely with the professionals from the start to ensure a full understanding of what they are doing. This will ensure the project progresses the way you intended.



Make sure there is a clear understanding between the project team and the professionals for costs from the start. It was noted that some organisations asked for adjustments to the project as it progressed but did not clarify with the professionals what cost implications they would have.

Check in with the professionals at each stage to ensure progress corresponds with your understanding.

Design

Take time over the design and look at other community halls/village halls as part of a benchmarking exercise. Looking at existing facilities will help focus your thoughts.

Keep the design as flexible as possible to allow for changing circumstances and trends. It is well recognised that trends in respect of community needs change. The design should allow for potential changes with little or no additional expenditure on capital build/refurbishment.

Keep the design as simple as possible and pay attention to the detail from the start. Simple designs are frequently the best way forward but the detail can make all the difference. For example projects reported a lack of power points or power points in the wrong places.

Refurbishment is not always the most effective long-term option. It can sometimes look like a cheaper way to meet current needs but may not allow for future flexibility. Make sure you carry out a full and detailed options appraisal to decide the best long term option.

Ensure that storage capacity is considered in the initial design. Many projects reported that they had not given enough thought to storage capacity and only once in use did the problems relating to this become apparent.

Working with the community

Manage expectations of the community from the start, particularly regarding timescales. Raising the community's expectations about timescales will lead to people disengaging from the process.

Make sure there are good and open communications between the project team and the community. The

community will ultimately make or break the project and determine its success.

Be aware of local pressure groups as they can divert the overall direction of the project. Louder voices do not always reflect the views of the wider community. Try to ensure you listen also to the "silent" majority.

And finally – Don't assume anything.

Engaging with the local community to meet local needs

Communication with the community must be regular, appropriate, engaging, two-way and easy to access, to ensure the project is owned and valued by them.

Communication should be continuous from the initial consultation through to completion and the ongoing development and running of the centre.

It is important that existing user groups are fully engaged during refurbishment/new build or they will find new locations, threatening the long term viability of the venue.

Consulting at a variety of community based activities and events ensures the “quiet majority” have the best opportunity to get their voices heard. There are many options including; open days, fetes, family pub nights, strategy socials, bingo, games nights.

Engagement should look at being intergenerational so that thinking is cohesive and overlapping, and yet flexible enough to allow for specific activities for some hard to reach or vulnerable groups.

Use as wide a range of communication channels as possible including new social media, emails, websites, newsletters and word of mouth.

In rural communities particularly engagement may need to look at laying on some kind of transport so that certain parts of the communities do not feel excluded and can effectively express their needs.

Do not overlook some of the more unusual opportunities to engage such as the local pub. This is often the hub of a community and will contain many of the people normally excluded from such community engagement activity.

It is important not to dismiss opposition groups/ individuals as a hindrance, but to focus specific engagement on them to try and respond to their

views and difficulties with the project.

Make the most of existing community partnerships and networks, such as Parish Councils, local Councillors, MPs, schools, places of worship, uniformed groups, the Women’s Institute.

Encourage volunteering within the community as this will increase engagement across the community but also increase your capacity to include a wider audience.



Building the experience and capacity of the management committee

Availability, experience and appropriate skill sets of management team members are critical to a successful project. This can be difficult as many will be volunteers, but getting a strong team from the outset can be critical to the success of the project.

The availability of appropriate professionals from within the community, who can be part of the management team, is a great advantage. In some cases the local community will have access to a range of appropriately skilled volunteers who are prepared to support the project. This has been shown to be a great advantage and also a significant cost saving.

The management team must be confident in making positive decisions. Positive and decisive decision making has been shown to progress projects more

quickly, but the management committee must be empowered and trusted to do this from the start.

Making sure there is representation from the user groups on the project team can have many benefits particularly in maintaining good links with the broader community.

Maintaining the commitment of the management team members throughout the duration of the project is difficult but critical to a successful outcome. If the team is continually changing the continuity is lost and also valuable time wasted bringing new members up to speed.

Ensuring there are good and effective channels of communication both within the management team and out to the broader community can help smooth out some potential difficulties.

It is important that the right leader of the team is selected as they will need to be strong when making decisions and be able to delegate effectively so that no one person carries undue pressure or responsibility.

Visiting similar village halls/community buildings is a great way to gather experience and knowledge. Many members of the management team will not have worked on a similar project so this enables quick and hands on learning.

Utilising the support provided by the local helper agency can be valuable in building the capacity of the management team. Local helper agencies have the skills and expertise to help develop capacity within the team across many skills including governance, financial reporting and team work.

If the funding allows, appointing a professional project manager can be a great advantage as they have the necessary skills, experience and time to move the project forward efficiently and effectively.



Forming and maintaining partnerships

Recognise that building partnerships takes time and commitment and it therefore needs proper planning and resourcing.

There are many different partners that will help secure the future of the project and these will include local businesses, which may use the venue in future, or even provide sponsorship or funding for equipment etc.

The most critical partnership will always be with the community so this must be the initial priority. This will ensure trust and support the ongoing sustainability of the project.

The building company will have a significant impact on the success of the project so it is critical that this partnership is sound from the beginning. Take time to understand the process and question the builders if you do not understand something. Make sure you are clear with instructions.

Local adult education and other skills and training providers may want to use the new facility for outreach provision, so establishing partnerships with them can help secure the long term viability of the centre.

Partnerships with other voluntary and community groups in the area can help.

Building a good partnership with the local helper agency, for example, the local Council for Voluntary Service can be important as they can offer support in completing the various applications, and suggest alternative/additional sources of funding.

Establish good relationships with the BIG grants officer from an early stage. They can often help resolve minor issues before they become real problems.

Try to establish direct links between the professionals and BIG's Capital Support Unit (CSU)

as this will resolve technical issues more quickly, rather than processing queries through a number of third parties

Establish partnerships with other community buildings in the area as they can provide direct support and advice from their own experience, and help benchmark your own performance.



Achieving longevity of activities

Where possible, make sure the main user groups are on the project team as this will provide them with a sense of ownership and loyalty and help ensure the building continues to offer a quality service to the community.

Make sure the existing activities and organisations using the facility are kept fully involved as many leave during the building phase and do not return, thereby threatening your income for the new venue.

Try to secure any “anchor” tenants on longer term agreements to allow for some stability in activity base. It may be appropriate to offer a discount to make this attractive.

Benchmark charges against similar community/village halls in the area, so that you are not losing activities and users due to too higher prices.

Make sure an appropriate budget is included for maintenance of the building, to ensure the upkeep of its physical appearance. If the venue is perceived as being poorly maintained you will lose users. Alternatively if it is seen as well cared for it may attract new users.

All activities using the facility must have access to the appropriate and properly maintained equipment.

Consider employing, paid if possible but volunteer if funding is not available, a premises supervisor to ensure a professional approach to managing the facility. This ensures continuity of information to users and allows for a central point of contact.

Maintain good ongoing relationships with the community to ensure the facility always reflects the services, activities and support required. The use of a wide range of engagement methods is essential to accessing all parts of the community.

A good organisational structure is very beneficial in

ensuring longevity of activities, new activities and smooth running. Engaging with volunteers, new people/users and being open to new ideas ensures continued interest and prevents a large burden being placed on the same people.

Linking up with community transport organisations in rural areas is very useful in attracting groups. This ensures more vulnerable individuals such as older people can still access the building, helps to reduce isolation and helps increase users in terms of word of mouth.

Dedicated development managers have proven useful in some circumstances. They have allowed the organisations to be more pro-active by going out and engaging with the local community and potential users in ways that would have been impossible if reliant solely on volunteers.



Reducing operating costs



- ▶ Use of air source heating will show savings.
- ▶ Good insulation is a cheap option for reducing energy costs and will magnify any heat saving initiatives that you may have.
- ▶ Using zoned areas within the building means that only areas being used will require energy.
- ▶ Excess energy can be sold back to energy companies through the Feed In tariff.
- ▶ If rainwater can be diverted to soak away there will be reduced charge from water companies to manage the excess water.
- ▶ Using automatic lights that only come on when a room is in use reduces costs.
- ▶ Installation of solar panels will show savings, although initial cost may be high.
- ▶ Infrared heaters have been shown to be a quick, cost effective solution to heating older buildings.

Marketing

The level of marketing achievable will vary on the size and capacity of the organisation, but it can make a difference to the success of the project.

Developing a dedicated marketing group will help focus attention and help drive forward the marketing campaign, but this may be difficult for smaller predominantly voluntary organisations.

It is important that the marketing and publicity campaign runs throughout the project from initial ideas and plans to building completion and activities services commencing.

Leaflets and regular newsletters are a simple and reasonably economic way of communicating with the community.

If there are community notice boards available they can be a very cheap way of marketing the project. If there is not a community notice board it may be cost effective to look at establishing one.

Utilise the new social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, and other web based and IT options such as a dedicated website or shared websites. This will most likely appeal to the younger age range.

The best marketing and publicity tool is often word of mouth, particularly in smaller communities.

Have open days for local businesses to encourage them to use and engage with the centre.

Use the local free press. If they will not come to you then write articles/send photographs to them.

Having someone/learning the skill to write a press release would help in sharing the message with the wider community.

Looking for business sponsorship can help spread the message about the centre and the activities and services it offers.



Monitoring and measuring outcomes

- ▶ The process of monitoring and measuring outcomes should not be new and specific to the BIG grant, but should naturally fall out of the good management and running of the organisation and the project.
- ▶ Monitoring and measuring outcomes helps to plan and make policy decisions about the project. Outcomes are about the impact your work is having on the community so regular monitoring of what you do should be a standard activity.
- ▶ Having the monitoring and measuring of outcomes as a standard agenda item at the management committee meetings ensures that they are central to the functioning of the project.
- ▶ Outcomes make a valuable contribution to ensuring the project remains people rather than building focused.
- ▶ It is important that the methods for monitoring the post build outcomes are agreed well in advance so that they can be tracked and reported on immediately.
- ▶ Ensure that there is a simple but robust method of recording progress against the outcomes. If the process is too complicated it will not be followed and will break down.
- ▶ If it is intended to use some type of feedback forms to gather monitoring information make sure they are easy to complete and appropriate to the outcomes. Also make sure they are available in different formats so all in the community can access them.
- ▶ If it is possible, look to engage in a peer review process with other similar projects in the area. This will not only ensure the monitoring and measuring methods are appropriate but allows for the sharing of good practice.



Top 10 tips

1. Establish that you either own the property and land, or that your lease will permit the work being proposed, well in advance of any application for funding.
2. Form a small focused project team with the appropriate range of skills and experience required to deliver a capital project.
3. If funding allows employ a professional project manager.
4. Make sure other financial commitments from funders are secure from the start.
5. Take time to secure the most appropriate professionals from the start.
6. Check in with the professionals at each stage to ensure progress corresponds with your understanding.
7. Take time over the design and look at other community halls/village halls as part of a benchmarking exercise.
8. Make sure you request the true cost of the project from the outset.
9. Manage expectations of the community from the start, particularly in respect of the time-scales.
10. Make sure there are good and open communications between the project team and the community. The community will ultimately make or break the project and determine its success.

Sources of information and support

Useful supporting documents and guidance can be found at:

www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/prog_reaching_communities

Here you will find guidance on:

- ▶ How to involve young people in your project
- ▶ Good governance guide
- ▶ Getting funding and planning successful projects
- ▶ Full cost recovery
- ▶ Equality matters
- ▶ Land and buildings guide.

